

The Legend of Zelda: The Craft of War

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Summary: Set prior to the events of my previous Zelda crossovers, Link and Zelda have been forcibly dragged into the world of Azeroth by an unknown power. There, they will find themselves allied on opposite sides in the conflict between Horde and Alliance as they search for the one who brought them there, and find a way back home.

1. Chapter 1

Chapter 1

The grass was a mix of sharp and soft on the palms of his hands and through the off white woolen breaches that he wore, as the green clad, elven figure felt his awareness return to him.

What happened? Did Epona throw me? Thoughts raced through the young man's mind. _That's not like her at all._

He opened his sapphire blue eyes groggily. His reddish, dark blond hair pounded as though someone had hit it with a sledgehammer (it wouldn't have been the first time). Reflexively, he began to clench and unclench his gauntleted hands, testing his fingers as his senses returned to him.

The chain mail shirt he wore under his green tunic felt like it was twice as heavy as usual as he slowly pushed himself up off the ground and onto his knees. Pain shot through his arms and chest as he did so, but not the kind of pain he would have felt had anything been broken. He knew that pain all too well. But his arms and torso had definitely taken a beating of some kind.

What had happened?

He searched his mind for the last thing he could remember. In his mind's eye he saw a girl, a young blond woman with high pointed ears like himself, and similar blue eyes wearing a pink and silver top

with a royal crest emblazoned on it and woolen riding pants. It had been a warm summer day, and they had been out riding near the castle. Or, more accurately rather, she had decided to go riding, and he had gone with her for her own protection, not that he had minded.

But where is she? He asked himself. If Epona had thrown him, she wouldn't have just ridden off and left him there in the grass. Then that thought led to darker onesâ€!

I have to find her! He tried to stand, but fell back to his backside on the grass. His legs refused to take the strain of his weight just yet. Panic began to set in as he fought with his reeling senses to look around and get the lay of the land around himself.

His eyes took in the sights around him. He was sitting in a grassy, manicured lawn. Okay, so not Hyrule Field, he realized as his mind reluctantly processed the images his eyes were feeding him.

The sky above him was clear, and the sun shone freely. Not far from where he sat he could see a line of trees which marked the beginning ofâ€ an orchard? Woods? He couldn't tell from this distance. His keen ears picked up the sounds of water running nearby. A river? A stream? In the distance, but not too distant, jagged hills rose like barrier walls around the valley that he realized he was in. He turned his head to the right and to the left trying to identify where he was, but none of it registered as being familiar.

"Do you need help, friend?" A kind, masculine voice asked from behind him. "Your landing looked kind of hard."

The broad shouldered elf turned his head and body around painfully to see who was speaking to him, using his hands and knees to support himself. The long blue and gold sword scabbard hanging beneath a blue, gold, and red crested shield on his back dragged in the ground, obstructing his movements.

When he was able to turn and see, there was an older, Ordonian man with a graying beard, balding head, and kind eyes bending over slightly with an outstretched hand. He wore a white robe with gold trim as though a Sage or someone whose profession was religious in nature.

"Was it your first trip by portal, my son?" The man asked, his hand remaining outstretched. "You look like you hit pretty hard when you appeared."

The young elven man took the outstretched hand that was offered and allowed the elder religious man to help him to his feet. The man was stronger than he appeared to be.

"Thank you." The green clad elf responded shakily, still feeling dazed and off balance. "I'm notâ€ I'm not sure what happened or where I am."

"Overshot Eversong a little perhaps? Well, no matter, the Light calls all as its children regardless of their race... or politics." The man responded, placing a steady hand at his back, "I am called Brother Garen. And your name, friend elf?"

A warmth spread from the man's hand throughout the elf's body and the aches and pains he felt began to fade and disappear. Soon, he felt stronger and more steady.

"Eversong?" The elf repeated. The name meant nothing to him. The elf searched his mind for the memory, surprisingly it took several seconds before he was able to get a word out, "Link. I'm called Link." Then, after a minute he asked, "Where am I?"

"You're in the grounds of Northshire Abbey in Elwyn Forest, Link." Brother Garen replied. "And that places you in a bit of a pickle if you try and leave here on foot, friend. Stormwind hasn't been friendly with Silvermoon for many years as I'm sure you know."

"Stormwind? Silvermoon? I don't understand." Link responded as he continued to look around. "I don't recognize this place at all. I was riding with..." he paused, realizing he ought to be careful as to how much he said, "a girl like myself. Blond hair, blue eyes, wearing a pink and silver tunic and riding breeches."

"I'm sorry, friend, but you are the only elf to appear today." Garen replied.

Link continued to look around him, but the princess who had been his charge was nowhere in sight. "I need to get back to her."

Near them stood a stately stone building with a bell tower, gables and arches which Link recognized as being meant for some kind of religious purpose. Blue banners with a golden lion image emblazoned on them hung from its walls. Standing near the blue painted double doors of the entry were a man and woman dressed in full plate armor with blue and white tabards displaying the same lion crest.

Other people, similarly dressed to Brother Garen, went about their business around the well tended grounds. Some stood watching him with looks of concern on their faces. Others, men and women of various dress and occupation seemed to pay the religious man and he no mind as though this might be a regular occurrence for them.

Brother Garen looked at his face, studying him as though studying a puzzle needing solving. "Where are you from, Link?"

"Castle Town... in Hyrule." Link responded. That was true enough, though he hadn't grown up there it had become his home.

"Hyrule..." Brother Garen repeated, trailing off the word thoughtfully. "I can't say I know for certain where that is, though it sounds vaguely familiar. I'm afraid my knowledge of geography isn't as good as it should be. I'm not as well traveled as some of my brethren. Is it in Kalimdor? Or Northrend perhaps? In any case, there is a mage from Dalaran staying here at the Abbey who may be able to open a portal to send you back before too much of an incident may be caused."

"Incident?" Link asked becoming wary. "I don't understand. Did I do something wrong?"

"You really don't understand, do you my friend?" Brother Garen asked. "A 'Blood Elf' as your people call themselves now, here in Elwyn

Forest? That can't remain quiet for long. We here at the Abbey may offer sanctuary, but only for so long."

"My people call themselves Hylians, after the goddess Hylia." Link responded, growing increasingly on his guard. He then asked, "Where is this 'mage' you spoke of?"

"Inside the abbey, the last I saw him." Brother Garen's face wore a skeptical look as he viewed Northshire's new visitor. "He's probably in the library perusing our shelves." He then said and turned, gesturing towards the white stone and blue trimmed structure. "We have a good collection of obscure volumes here, many of which were rescued from Alterac and Stromgarde in the north before their fall. Many scholars come here from all across the Alliance to study our works." There was a note of pride in the elder man's voice.

More names that means nothing to me, Link thought to himself. Out loud, he said, "Please, would you take me to him?"

"Of course, my son." Brother Garen replied, and began to lead Link towards the Abbey doors.

As they approached the fully armored guards standing near the doors, one of them, seeing Link's sharp ears more clearly, stepped towards him and drew a broadsword which Link could tell was well honed.

"Stop!" The guard announced in a decidedly self-important tone, "You're under arrest, Horde scum!"

"Peace, Garrett!" Brother Garen batted the guard's sword to the side without a thought. "I have invoked sanctuary. This young man is under the protection of the Abbey for now regardless of his race or politics. He is obviously here by a simple portal mishap, not a Horde invasion. We're going to see our resident mage to send him home as soon as possible. Please, stand aside."

"But he's a Blood Elf! And he's armed!" Garrett protested. "He could be a spy!"

"Not according to him." Garen responded. "Stand aside so we can straighten this mess out, or I can take it up with Marshall McBrideâ€| and inform him of your late night at the Lion's Pride in Goldshire with a certain young lady..."

Garrett stiffened and backed away. "Howâ€|?" He asked in a hoarse whisper under the face plate of his helmet.

"The innkeeper and I have known each other for a long time." Brother Garen replied innocently. "So, are there any more objections?"

Garrett backed up against the stone wall of the abbey and quickly shook his head.

"No? Good. I would hate to see you removed from Northshire to a less amiable posting." Brother Garen continued, though his gaze shifted wordlessly to the other, female guard who had remained silent throughout the encounter.

Not waiting for another response, Brother Garen led Link through the Abbey doors. As he did, he remarked to the female guard, "Please give

your father my best when you see him, Lucinda."

Link could hear a distinct "huff" (and an armored foot stomp?) as he and his escort passed through the doorway.

The two went in and around a defensive barrier wall into the main hall. He then led him through another hallway off the main hall which opened up onto a spacious room lined with bookshelves. A staircase lined one wall leading up to a second level. Brother Garen headed for the stairs.

"Khelden Bremen is usually to be found among the shelves upstairs. There is a particular kind of magic that the mages of Alterac used to specialize in which he is researching, though I haven't the skill in arcanery to understand exactly what or why." The religious man explained. "My studies were devoted to holy pursuits."

"Is he an Ordonian like yourself?" Link asked. He had never seen an Ordonian skilled in the use of magic before.

"Ordonian?" Garen asked, confused. "Now it is my turn to be confused. What do you mean by that?"

Link then pointed to his own ears, and then to Garen's which were clearly rounded and much smaller than Link's own.

"Is he human, do you mean? Yes, he's human." Garen chuckled. "You tend to find a lot of us here in Elwyn now," then his voice took on a more melancholic note, "especially since we're the last human kingdom left."

There was such a resigned sorrow to the older man's voice, Link could only respond, "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

The old man stopped on the stairs and turned to look at the elven man behind him.

"No," Garen replied seeing the sincerity in Link's eyes, "I believe you didn't." After pausing for another minute, he turned and continued up the stairs saying, "Come, my son. Let's get you back to where you belong. If Khelden Bremen doesn't know how to get you back, he almost certainly will know who does."

They emerged from the top of the stairs and made a right along a railing and into another chamber of the library. Like the one they had just exited, it too was lined with bookshelves. On the far wall stained glass windows let the bright daylight in in various colors, though not enough to bring light to the whole chamber on their own. Several candles in various holders around the room played that role. In the middle of the room stood a large rough hewn wooden table with a few equally rough hewn, but well used chairs positioned around it.

One of those chairs was occupied by a dark haired man in azure blue robes. He was hunched over a large, red, leather bound volume on the table with yellowed vellum pages. He appeared to have taken no notice of the two intruders, though the sound of Link's boots on the wood and stone floor echoed through the room.

"Maester Bremen?" Brother Garen asked aloud, though respectful of

intruding on the man's solitude.

If the mage had heard him, he gave no indication of it. Instead, Link could hear a quiet whispering coming from the table, though he couldn't make out the words being said.

"Maester Bremen?" The religious man asked again, a little louder.

The whispering stopped, though the man still gave no other indication of having heard. But this seemed sufficient for Brother Garen as he continued. "There's a young man here who has more need of your skills than of mine. It appears there was a portal mishap."

"Indeed." The mage responded. "And this was important enough to interrupt my researchâ€| why?"

"Because the longer he stays here, the more of a problem his presence may become." Brother Garen replied.

"So, send him packing then, and leave me to my work." The mage replied, still not looking up from his book.

"Yes, well there are special circumstances involved regarding the shape of his ears." Brother Garen replied, some bit of sarcasm creeping into his voice.

"The shape of his what?" The mage finally looked up and away from his book to face the two intruders. Link could see then that he was also, in fact, "human" like Garen, and wore a large mustache which seemed to be trying to become a full beard, but the man's chin wouldn't cooperate.

"I see now what you mean." The mage then said as he took in the green clad young elven man. "Yes, I'm sure young Garrett outside was thrilled to meet our new guest."

"So..." Brother Garen began again, intending to explain Link's situation to the mage. He never got the chance to form the words. The clanging of the Abbey's bells ensured that.

Suddenly the mage jumped to his feet, an alarmed look in his eyes, and Brother Garen's expression became very serious as he said in a whisper, "Noâ€| Not now."

"What?" Link asked looking around again. "Why are the bells ringing like that?"

"Because we're under attack." Brother Garen replied.

"Careful there now, elf girl." A kind, yet raspy, matronly voice said gently. "You shouldn't move too much just yet."

Pain shot through the lithe young woman's body as consciousness returned to her mind. It jolted her as she attempted to move her fingers and open her eyes. She wanted to cry out for the pain, but found that she couldn't. She slowly willed her bright, royal blue eyes open to a somewhat blurry world.

"You landed hard, girl. Shaggara is surprised that you survived it at

all. It will take some time." The voice said again.

The young elf woman slowly tried to turn her blond head towards the direction of the voice. But all she saw was a blur of brownish green in a somewhat distorted Hylian, or maybe Gerudo form. She opened her mouth to try and speak and found the words hard and whispered,

"Wh..." It hurt so badly just to say that much, but she had to force herself to continue. "Whâ€| where amâ€| amâ€| I?" It came out as a harsh, quiet whisper, but it was coherent enough.

"You're lying in Shaggara's bed in her home after she found you face down in her swine pen all battered and bruised. Shaggara didn't know a Blood Elf could turn such colors." The voice chuckled slightly.

"Whâ€| Whoâ€| areâ€| are you?" The young woman asked, her mind confused and hazy. She thought she heard the woman call her a "Blood Elf."

"Shaggara thought that was obvious young one. It is her house after all." Shaggara replied.

The young woman then heard the sound of glass, or maybe ceramic vessels being used and jostled. "Now that you're awake, perhaps Shaggara can help ease some of your pain." Shaggara said kindly. "Shaggara is no healer, but she was taught by a great shaman once how to brew a simple healing potion from herbs that grow around her house. Drink, girl."

The young woman could feel a smooth vessel being pressed up against her lips and she parted them as best she could to allow the liquid to flow into her mouth. Instantly the pain in her head began to recede, and as the liquid flowed through her mouth and down into her throat, the healing spread throughout her body and she could feel the ability to move more freely again, even if she was still a little sore.

The young woman's vision cleared, and she looked again into the face of her benefactress. It was like no face she had ever seen. The woman's skin was a brownish green, taut and muscled, with only a few wrinkles here and there to indicate maybe middle age? Her eyes were small and inset to her face, and they were a blue like the deepest part of the sea. As she looked into those eyes she saw a fierceness, a passion, and a depth of wisdom she knew in few others, as well as compassion. Her nose was short and squat, and the woman sported small yellowed tusks from her bottom jaw. Her head was shaved bald except for a warrior's braid of black hair streaked with gray she sported from the back of her head. Shaggara's ears were pointed, though not as long as the young woman's own. She was both beautiful and monstrous, compassionate and ferocious all at once. She wore a leather tunic over a muscled, athletic build, and rough leather breeches.

"How do you feel now, girl?" Shaggara asked.

"Better, thank you." The young woman replied, her voice steadier and more confident.

"Good. Shaggara has used that potion many times. It saved her life

more than once in battle." Shaggara told her as she turned to return the used bottle to a shelf on her wall. "Now, Shaggara would like to know who you are, and how you landed in her swine pen."

A name came to the young elf woman's mind, and she said it aloud, "Zelda, my name is Zelda." In spite of the potion, her mind still felt hazy, as though her memories were trapped in a fog.

"Zelda is it? Strange name for one of the Sindorei, but then Shaggara thinks all elf names to be strange." The woman smiled as she turned back to her charge, revealing rows of sharp yellowed teeth.

"Sindorei?" Zelda asked in confusion. "Who are the Sindorei?"

"You must have landed harder than Shaggara thought. Perhaps your head needs stronger potion than Shaggara can brew." Shaggara said with some concern. "Sindorei is what you are, girl. Though many of your kind now call themselves Blood Elves in honor of all of your kin who were murdered by the Scourge."

No, that didn't sound right to Zelda at all. She searched her hazy memory but came up with nothing. Instead, another word to describe her people surfaced, "Hylian," she said. "My people are called Hylians. My land is called Hyrule."

"Hyrule?" Now it was Shaggara's turn to be confused. "Shaggara's travelled from one end of this world to the other. Shaggara has even traveled to her ancestral home in the Outland and spent time with her Mag'har kinsmen. Shaggara has never seen or heard of any land called 'Hyrule'."

Zelda slowly propped herself up with her arms. She was still sore and stiff, but her body was no longer screaming at her. Her mind began to race and whir at this news. If she wasn't in Hyrule or anywhere near, then where was she?

"Shaggara, what is this land called?" She asked her host.

"You're in Durotar girl, a day's ride south of Orgrimmar." Shaggara responded. Then seeing the blank look of non-recognition in Zelda's eyes, she said, "in Kalimdor." Still seeing no look of recognition, she then said, "This world's called Azeroth by most; but judging by your expression, Shaggara can see that you don't know that name either."

"No." Zelda responded.

Shaggara studied Zelda's face for some time. Then she said, "You don't know how you got here, do you girl?"

"No." Zelda said again. "The last thing I remember was riding my horse in Hyrule Field withâ€¢ with my bodyguard. The next thing was waking up in pain here."

Shaggara took a seat cross-legged on her floor next to the sleeping mats and furs Zelda had been laying on which she had generously called a bed. "Shaggara thought you were noble born, even for an elf your shirt is finely tailored, and the crest sewn into it reeks of royalty. Shaggara has little experience with magic herself, but she

knows it when she sees or hears of it. And this stinks of powerful, dark magic. Perhaps some sorceror tried to take you and something went wrong? Or maybe something went right for you, because you came to Shaggara and not to the sorceror? Perhaps what gods or powerful forces there may be are watching over you, Zelda of Hyrule."

"Perhaps they are." Zelda replied quietly as she reasoned through Shaggara's logic and found it sound. Except, as her mind began to clear, she had a piece of the puzzle Shaggara did not. A piece which might explain the "why" of the attempted abduction. And if that was true, then her "bodyguard" might have also been dragged here as well. Whether the third bearer wasâ€| She didn't know if that was even possible. His prison was outside of normal time and space. But it was finding Link, if he was truly here as well, that would be the most pressing matter.

"My bodyguard, Link. He may have been pulled here as well. It's important that I know for certain. He and I shareâ€| a certain bond."

A look of thoughtful understanding passed over Shaggara's face, though she said nothing for several minutes.

Then Shaggara spoke up again after some musing of her own. "Shaggara knows of a mage in Orgrimmar who may be able to help you find your friend, and a way back to this "Hyrule" you speak of, Zelda Noble Born. A mage Shaggara would trust with her life. Shaggara would take you there, if that is where you wish to go."

"That is generous, Shaggara, but you have done so much for me already." Zelda told her reflexively, though she knew it wasn't the wisest response. She was in a foreign land with no reference points to speak of.

Shaggara smiled a half smile, "So, Zelda knows her way around Shaggara's world without help now? You have all the gold and supplies you need to find this 'friend' of yours?"

Not giving Zelda time to answer, Shaggara said, "Shaggara thinks not. It would be Shaggara's shame to let you wander this land on your own. Too many honorless orcs these days who would take advantage of a pretty one such as you. No. On Shaggara's honor, she will accompany you and see you safe."

Zelda looked into Shaggara's eyes and saw a determination there and thought she understood. Shaggara had been given a responsibility, a quest, whether she asked for it or not, and she was going to see it through regardless of the cost. Her personal honor demanded it of her. She nodded in acknowledgment, seeing any further argument would offend the proud warrior woman.

"Yes, Shaggara will keep you safe in her land, Zelda Noble Born. She will see you home." The Orc woman told her with a finality to her voice.

Fires were burning in the stands of trees across the river from the Abbey. Among the fires could be seen hundreds of hulking armored shadows armed for war. As Link stood on the opposite bank near the abbey with what few guards and armored soldiers there were, he knew instinctively these people would be overrun.

None of them appeared to have been battle tested before, except perhaps for the one in the more decorated armor which indicated his rank as the commanding officer. Marshall McBride sat mounted on a warhorse among his men surveying the scene, seeing the same thing Link was. His countenance was stern, and Link could tell he was resigning himself to his fate. Even Garrett who stood near by him who had been so keen on arresting him; Link's keen ears could hear the young man shaking so hard in his armor the joints were clanking together..

In spite of the unfamiliar location, and Link's disorientation, they were sights, sounds, and smells that he knew all too well. They were the stuff of the nightmares which kept him awake at night. Dreams of places and battles that he knew he had witnessed and fought, but knew equally well that he hadn't. They were dreams that both terrorized him, and gave him meaning.

Next to him, Brother Garen held a staff of intricate design and detail. He appeared to be in some kind of a meditative trance, perhaps in prayer to the "Light" that he had talked about. The mage, Khelden Bremen stood on the bank as well, chanting what Link believed to be some kind of protection spell, though it didn't appear to be going as well. There was too much of the look of fear about the mage, and the words stumbled as they came out of his mouth.

To their rear and behind them near the Abbey itself were regular farm folk, priests, and religious all preparing themselves for a battle they did not know how to fight much less win. In the background, Link also heard the cries of a young babe in arms, its mother trying to reassure it even while trying to keep herself calm as well.

Link then became aware of a mounted rider in armor pulling up next to him. He was well muscled under his plate armor, and his eyes were hard but not unforgiving. He wore no helmet, and his head was shaved clean like a man accustomed to war. He wore a light brown mustache and goatee. It was the man Brother Garen had called Marshall McBride.

"The Blackrock Orcs hold no allegiance to either Alliance or Horde, elf. If they cross that river, they will not think twice of slaughtering you any more than they will of slaughtering the rest of us here." The man gestured an armored gauntlet towards the unarmed peasant people behind him, in particular the mother with her babe. "Regardless of your people's differences with mine, if we stand together we may survive this day. If we let those differences divide us, we will surely die. What say you elf? You look like you know how to use that fine sword and shield you carry, and your eyes and calm manner in the face of this tell me you've done so many a time before. Will you stand and fight with us as our people once did many years ago?"

Link nodded gravely. He hadn't considered the possibility of not fighting. A warm burning sensation crested on the back of his left

hand, his sword hand, and all fear left his being. There was only the task at hand.

"I will fight with you. I will not let these innocents die." Link pronounced slowly, and with a deadly solemnity.

Marshall McBride straightened up in his saddle, taken aback by the elf's demeanor and gravity. This was no ordinary elf warrior, he decided. He nodded at him, and went to join his own soldiers, none of whom appeared to have nearly the wherewithal the foreign elf did in the face of combat. He hoped the young man's presence would be the deciding factor in their favor.

He drew the ornately wrought sword he carried and, pointing it towards the wooden bridge which led to the other side of the river he shouted, "Forward men! For the Light!"

With his left hand Link drew his own sword from the sheath at his back, known to most in his land as the Master Sword, which had been his companion for many, many adventures. His shield went to his right arm. At the same time, his pulse slowed and the world around him seemed to slow down as his senses were heightened. Immediately, he could see that the men marching towards the bridge would be decimated almost as soon as they crossed. Hidden among the burning trees were orcs with crossbows and long weapons that resembled cannons. They were just waiting for the men to come into range.

"Marshall!" Link called out to the leader of the soldiers, but either he didn't hear him, or he chose to ignore him. Either way, he continued his ill fated advance.

Link's mind went to work as he looked around for resources and options. Then he spied another horse, a bay gelding by the look of it, nearby being ridden by a farmer who held a pitchfork as threateningly as he could. Faster than most would think possible, he leaped towards the man on the horse, and knocked him out of the saddle, taking the reins himself.

"Hey!" The man yelled from the ground on his back, his pitchfork several feet from his hand.

But Link didn't respond as he turned the horse and kicked at its flanks. Surprised, the horse then realized its new master actually knew how to ride him, and responded by launching itself into full gallop in the direction Link wanted to go. Link gave little thought to the poor farmer on the ground except that he had probably just saved the man's life. If the man had carried on with his own plan to die bravely in battle, that's exactly what would have happened.

The horse galloped at full speed, racing towards the small column of men the Marshall was leading, and then shot past them and onto the bridge. If the Marshall had said or responded in any way, Link didn't hear or see. His entire focus was on his first set of targets.

Once across the bridge, Link gauged the horse's speed and distance and then he got his feet up and onto the saddle, and riding for a few seconds in the crouching position he brought the Master Sword and his shield into his hands again and jumped as far and high as he could, using the horse's momentum to carry him even farther and higher forward, twisting his whole body into a spin with his sword as he

leaped until "Thwack!" He felt the Master sword strike its tree hidden target true and half of the orc's unarmored head fell away from its body and the orc fell from the branches it had been hiding in as Link landed behind the tree on the ground in a roll to protect himself from the shock and impact of the high fall.

He then sprang to his feet again, and hearing the click of a crossbow's trigger, his shield went reflexively in the direction of the sound and then next thing he heard and felt was a bolt hitting his shield and bouncing off.

Without conscious thought, he found himself next to the orc behind a nearby tree who had fired the weapon and within seconds, that orc found its innards laying on the ground next to its quickly dying body. He then felt the pull of his sword towards the next orc who turned its attention to him, and then that orc too fell at his feet less than whole.

Seeing the new upstart threat, all the orcs who had been focusing on the bridge and the small, insignificant army which dared to cross it, then turned their attention to the elf warrior who showed no fear of them and whose blade was all too quick to spill their blood.

Suddenly, the air around Link became alive with arrows and shot aimed at him, but his instincts and reflexes, enhanced by the power of courage that coursed through him dodged and danced around each one, and every time the Master Sword swung, another of the Blackrock attackers fell.

Somewhere in the haze he heard a raspy deep voice shout out "Demon! They have unleashed a demon from the void upon us!"

The next thing Link felt was an orc's face being bashed in by the shield he carried. The orc slumped to the ground, never to rise again.

Then Link found himself surrounded by several of the creatures that he could now see so clearly. They were huge, and well muscled. Their skin was a bright greenish hue. They had faces like gorillas, but with huge yellow tusks that protruded from their lower jaws. All of them carried enormous axes or swords, such that he knew none of the humans on the other side could even lift. They had abandoned the encroaching army of peasant soldiers entirely, seeing him and the only real threat to them, and they all were running at him, screaming war cries with abandon.

Link raised his sword high in the air, summoning a divine power he barely understood, but knew its potential in battle. Soon, the Master Sword radiated a holy, pure energy. Then, time slowed down for him as he brought that divinely charged sword down and began to spin with it. As he did, the energy began to unleash itself with a holy vengeance upon all those who would slaughter the innocents he had taken it upon himself to protect. Waves of pure light flew from the sword striking all those within its reach. And as he finished his spin and landed, steadyng himself, he returned to his senses and the battle rage had passed.

When he looked around him, all he saw were the decimated corpses of orcs around himself. Dozens? Hundreds? He didn't know. He couldn't

count them. But in the distance he could hear the clear, raspy cry of "Retreat! Retreat!" And he knew it was over. They wouldn't be returning. Not today.

And then all was silence as he surveyed the carnage he had wrought. Not so much memories as feelings flooded his being. Feelings of familiarity, like he had been here before and he would be here again, in this moment, doing the exact same thing, protecting those who could not protect themselves.

He looked down at himself. His green tunic and white breeches were covered in red blood and gore that were not his own. It wasn't the first time, and he knew he would see it again, late at night as he woke in a cold sweat. Such would be his existence.

He then looked up and towards the old wooden bridge. There stood the soldiers and Marshall McBride on his horse. None of them moved so much as a muscle. The Marshall's face was filled with what? Fear? Awe? Respect? Relief? Some combination thereof? Link didn't know that either.

The scene stayed like that for several minutes, and Link cleaned his sword as best he could with the cloak of a dead orc laying near him before he sheathed it. Then, leaving his stunned men behind him, the Marshall rode up to meet the lone warrior. Upon reaching him, he then dismounted. The "look" still upon his features.

"My great thanks, Paladin, and my great apologies for myself and my men." He told him in a humble and emotional voice.

Link said nothing at first. Then he replied, "I only did what needed to be done to protect the innocent. There is no need..." He trailed off, seeing that his words were having little effect. He then said, "You called me 'Paladin'. Why?"

"For one so obviously in possession of the Holy Light to be its warrior, how could you not be? I have heard of the Elven Paladins before, but never have I seen such power or courage displayed before now. And to fight in only a chain mail shirt and leather gauntlets under those clothes! Gods man! Ask of me any boon, anything for this and you shall have it. I swear it on my honor." Marshall McBride told him.

"I only want to find my companion and go home." Link responded. "To Hyrule."

"Then on my honor, Sir Link, I will see both desires fulfilled or die in the attempt. I owe you my life, my daughter's life, and the lives of my men and their families." Marshall McBride told him. "I am at your disposal."

Seeing he truly had an ally in his new quest, Link responded, "Thank you, Marshall."

"Now, let us see about getting you some fresh clothes, or at least cleaning these." The human told him, gesturing his hand towards Link's shoulder. "Come, friend."

The metal, stone, and wood walls of Orgrimmar rose menacingly before them as Zelda and Shaggara drew closer. Several watchfires could be

seen burning brightly upon them, and well muscled, armed shadows could be seen patrolling them. They were still a good distance away, and already the Hylian could tell that this was no small village or town. It seemed to dwarf even Castle Town, and that was the largest city she had experience of.

The sun had gone completely down over the barren, rocky red horizon over an hour before. It had been a starkly beautiful sight. Zelda had thought they would make camp, but Shaggara had wanted to press on explaining, "Orgrimmar is not far now. A good friend of Shaggara's keeps a clean inn with good food. You will see."

It was Zelda's first experience riding the huge, wolf-like canine the orc woman called a "worg", but it wasn't so dissimilar from her horse, Starfire, though she found it quite a bit furrier and lower to the ground. The one she rode was gray like the timberwolves which roamed the forests of the outer edges of her homeland. It reminded her of another wolf she had known as well, one dear to her heart.

As they drew nearer to the great gates, Zelda had feared that they might be closed after dark, like Castle Town's were but no, they were wide open, though many warriors, like Shaggara though larger (Zelda guessed they were the males of her species) stood guard over them. When they had slowed down, she asked about the gates being open after sundown.

"Only fools dare attack Orgrimmar. It is a city of warriors born and bred." Was Shaggara's amused response.

They rode through the massive gates and around the barrier walls. Huge, well muscled and heavily armed Orc guards patrolled the entry way loop as they rode by. Zelda felt more than one pair of eyes follow her as she rode behind Shaggara, though none stopped her or questioned her presence there.

They rode on and through the passage and into an open valley. Throughout the valley were great metal and stone structures of all sizes. There were those which were clearly shops, some she thought might be homes, and others she couldn't determine their function. In the center of the valley stood a great fortress, imposing and intimidating and dominating the entire scene in front of her. Though, as they rode slowly by, she heard Shaggara snort at the sight of it. Over the whole valley there seemed to be a red haze or hue.

Shaggara led her to a two story building along the eastern wall of the valley, not far from the gates. It seemed well kept up and the sounds of drinking and rough but friendly banter could be heard from inside, occasionally punctuated by bursts of hoarse laughter. Out in front, several riding animals of various types were tied up. There were a couple of worgs like she and Shaggara rode, but also a large reptilian creature that stood on two legs with a large head and rings of sharp teeth. Shaggara rode up to this tie up and dismounted, motioning for Zelda to follow. She then moved to tie both of their worgs alongside the others.

"The Broken Tusk is safe. Shaggara trusts the innkeeper here." Shaggara told her as the orc woman secured their mounts.

The two women then walked through the open doorway to the inn. As they came into the establishment, the feeling Zelda got from the

inside was a combination of civilized and feral all at once. There were several low tables, though no chairs to sit at. Instead, what guests there were sat cross-legged on the floor on clean, well kept furs. The room was decorated with edged weapons which had obviously seen combat. Were they trophies? Candles and torches assisted in the lighting of the otherwise dim common room. Towards the back, a bar which seemed overly large and stocked with bottles containing liquors of every color imaginable dominated the room. Off to one side, a staircase led up to a second floor.

Behind the bar, another orc woman was carefully cleaning a mug, though Zelda could tell her eyes were never far from her guests. Like Shaggara, she too was tall and well muscled, and wore a stylish, low cut leather tunic, and blue dyed leather breaches with some kind of yellow trim. Her head was also shaved bald except for a single warrior's braid which extended from the back of her head.

Upon sensing new visitors, the orc woman looked up and a great smile broke out over her tusked mouth.

"Shaggara, my sister in battle!" The innkeeper shouted in their direction, and though a few eyes turned no one seemed to find her greeting out of place. She then came out from behind her bar and approached Shaggara eagerly.

"Gryshka, my sister!" Shaggara returned. "It has been too long."

The two clasped arms and then embraced.

"That is not my doing, battle sister. You come to Orgimmar from your pig farm far too little." Gryshka replied, chiding her.

"Retirement suits Shaggara." Shaggara returned simply.

Gryshka released her friend and then asked with an amused expression, "So then, what brings the mighty Shaggara out of her retirement today?"

Shaggara motioned towards Zelda. "Perhaps we can speak somewhere more private?"

A serious expression crossed Gryshka's face as she eyed the young elven woman in her mudspattered, yet obviously fine raiment.

"Come, follow Gryshka." She said, and motioned for the two newcomers to follow her.

Gryshka led Shaggara and Zelda to an opening hidden by thick furs and leathers that led to a set of private rooms behind the bar. There were a few furnishings here, most notably a table, a chest, a bookshelf with a few volumes. To one side was a sleeping mat of furs and Zelda could see feathers jutting out from underneath the furs. The walls were decorated with edged weapons and pieces of armor. Around the table were more furs for sitting upon. This is where Gryshka motioned for Shaggara and Zelda to sit down.

When they did, Gryshka sat opposite them and said, "Talk battle sister. Have no fear of listening ears here. None dare to enter Gryshka's private room without her permission." She gestured to the edged weapons on the wall, and Zelda could then see traces of dried

blood on the edges of the blades.

Shaggara then proceeded to explain how she found Zelda, and Zelda filled in the gaps as to where she was from and what her last memories in Hyrule were.

Gryshka snorted, "Dark magic. Powerful dark magic, battle sister. To rip someone from their world. It reeks of it."

"Shaggara believed so as well. Much of this we saw in Northrend did we not?" Shaggara said.

Gryshka nodded, looking at Zelda. "The mages of Northrendâ€¦ yes, very powerful. But the Kirin Tor polices there own there, in Dalaran."

"If I am here, there is a good chance that another is here as well, a companion of mine. Is there any way to tell if he is here, and where he might be?" Zelda asked. "We were together the last thing I remember before waking up here."

"That is a question for a mage, and Gryshka is no mage, elf girl." The innkeeper snorted. "She puts her trust in her own strength and steel. But," she said pensively, "she knows one that she trusts, but he is not here in Orgrimmar. Not the last time she heard, at any rate." Gryshka replied.

"You speak of Goreth?" Shaggara asked.

Gryshka nodded. "Last I heard, he traveled west towards the Barrens. Perhaps as far as Thunderbluff. That was a week ago."

"Are there no other mages in Orgrimmar?" Zelda asked, a little confused.

"Plenty!" Gryshka replied. "But none that Gryshka knows will not sell you for spell ingredients and spare parts. Orgrimmar has changed since Warchief Thrall left Hellscream's son in charge, and not for the better. No, better to take the time and find Goreth. Orgrimmar is not even safe for orcs these days, much less pretty elf girls, allies or no."

Shaggara nodded her agreement.

"Before you go chasing after him, there is another who would want to see you again, Shaggara. It has been some time since Matron Battlewail has laid eyes on you, and she is not getting any younger." Gryshka told her. "It would be shameful to arrive in Orgrimmar and not pay her a visit."

"Yes, of course. Shaggara will see her tomorrow, with the little ones." Shaggara told her.

"Good. They always love to hear the stories of our adventures." Gryshka told her, and then said conspiratorily, "even the true ones."

"Those are the least believable." Shaggara said, and then laughed.

Zelda took in the good natured talk between the two orc women. It seemed to contrast so much with what she had been taught. In her world, the two women would be seen as monsters at best. Here, it was clear to her that they shared a bond as sisters, and that sense of family and honor was of utmost importance to them.

After some more talk between the two women, Gryshka insisted that Shaggara and Zelda stay with her in her own rooms that night where she could be assured of their protection, rather than in the short hammocks and beds upstairs which were in a common sleeping area.

"It wouldn't have been a problem when Thrall ruled the Horde in Azeroth, but these days are different." Gryshka explained. "Honor means something different to the younger warriors than it does to us."

Zelda thanked her graciously for her hospitality, though Gryshka seemed to shrug it off.

"Do your people treat guests any differently where you come from?" Gryshka asked. "No friend of Shaggara's will come to harm under my roof. Those who try..." She then motioned to the weapons on her wall with a wicked grin. "They aren't just for show, elf girl."

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

"AARGHH!" The green skinned man cried out in pain as consciousness returned to him, his fiery red head thrown back as he did so. His whole body felt as if it were on fire, or as if someone had dropped him from the ruins of Skyloft without any means of a soft landing.

As he tried to sense past the pain, he found his arms were raised high above his head and, try as he might, he couldn't move them much. His wrists were fixed. As he tried the muscles in his legs and feet, he found them fixed as well.

Someone had dared to bind him?

"Oh, you're awake. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever come to. Not that it would make a difference to my work." A melodic male voice spoke off to his left.

The prisoner, as he realized that was what the owner of the voice meant him to be, forced his eyes open and the world in front of him was a blur of reds, tans, and golds. There was a large green blur off to his right.

"Yes, you landed quite hard in my laboratory. I imagine your vision is quite blurred from the impact. Quite frankly, I'm surprised you're still able to see straight at all." The voice continued, and the prisoner could hear bottles rustling along a table.

"To be honest, I hadn't expected the spell to bring you, that is, a person through, but it is no matter. From my experiments on you while you were unconscious, you are carrying the thing I was looking for, so all I need do is extract it. Though, I daresay it will likely

cause you even more pain." The voice continued to explain nonchalantly, almost wistfully.

Carrying the thingâ€¢? The prisoner tried to think through the haze of pain. _Power_, it came to him. _He wants the _Power_ I carry. That is why he brought me here. Well, if he wants it so muchâ€¢_

The prisoner began, as much as he could, to focus the power he carried and channeled his innate magic through it. The pain he felt decreased, and his vision cleared as he did so. He then pulled against his restraints, intending to demonstrate for this upstart just how that _Power_ was wielded, andâ€¢

"Ugh!" The prisoner wrenched against the chains that bound him, but they would not give. He tried again, pushing all the power within him against them. The manacles and chains glowed white with the force being put upon them, but they wouldn't budge.

"AAAH!" He shouted in rage.

"Interesting." The owner of the voice spoke again. "Oh, I wouldn't bother trying it again, regardless of how much power you put into your magic. Though I must say the artifact you carry amplifies your own power much more than my instruments can detect, and that is impressive. But you might as well relax for the moment. Those chains are forged of trillium hardened ghost iron, and enchanted with spells few of even my people know. Not even an immortal titan could break them."

The prisoner looked with rage towards the upstart, and noted the upswept pointed ears and pale skin of a race he hated with a depth not even he understood. The man's hair was a reddish blond, and he had only the wisp of a goatee. He wore long purple robes inscribed with runes that the prisoner did not know, which itself made him uneasy. The upstart was standing in front of a long metallic worktable covered in various implements of alchemy and sorcery that the green skinned man recognized only too well. Off to the right, the green blur had cleared into a large, man sized green crystal that glowed with its own power, and appeared to be tethered to the tan stone walls and marble floor of the man's laboratory.

"Hylian scum." The prisoner spat. "I am Ganondorf!" He announced as though the world should tremble at his name.

"Hylian?" The man questioned, ignoring the man's own name for the moment. "Well, that is a new one. I shall have to research it. Perhaps it is found in the same text in which I discovered the existence of the artifact you carry within you. The one capable of granting any wish I make."

"Did you not hear me?!" Ganondorf raged. "I AM GANONDORF!"

"Yes, I heard you quite clearly the first time, and quite frankly I don't care what your name is. After all, there's a good chance you won't survive the procedure anyway. So, what does it matter?" The not-Hylian elvish looking man said as he turned back to whatever it was he was doing at his table.

At his workbench, the magic wielding elf began to hum a tune while he worked. Then after a minute he stopped and said, "I suppose since you

told me your name, it would be ungracious of me to keep mine to myself, especially if you survive the procedure. I am called Duazhen by my kin." He then turned back to his work and continued humming.

And for the first time since he was a small boy, when the great sandstorms of the Gerudo desert had terrified him and threatened to destroy his whole world, Ganondorf began to know what it meant to be powerless, and afraid. As Duazhen hummed, images of the wide open desert and its powerful sandstorms threatening to engulf his small child's frame filled his mind.

The sun rose red across a lightly clouded sky over Orgrimmar that morning. It was partly hidden through the haze of the orc city's ever burning forges and smithies which churned out master crafted weapons and armor for its warrior citizenry.

Shortly after dawn, the city's population of races and peoples from all across Azeroth began going about their business trading, training, teaching, and just living their daily lives as best they could.

Zelda saw a tall, strong orc male leading a green skinned child with brown hair tied back into a ponytail no taller than her waist. The larger orc's hand gently but firmly grasping the child's smaller and more delicate one. She wondered where they were going.

As she followed Shaggara up the rock and gravel pathways of Orgrimmar, she saw a tall, thin blue creature with tusks more pronounced than the orcs wearing an apron. Though she didn't know for certain, it looked male to her. The creature was bent over some packing crates in front of a shop filling out some papers.

Another, short green creature that she might have taken for a Bokoblin looked as though it was attempting to repair a wheeled mechanical contraption of some kind which sat against the side of the road. It wore a leather belt with different kinds of metal tools. She watched as it looked at the machine with a scowl on its face and scratched its chin. Then he looked her way, and seeing her staring at him he smiled a great toothy smile and gave her a thumbs up sign.

Embarassed, Zelda shyly returned the sign and then looked away quickly.

Shaggara led Zelda into a great natural crevice which the city had taken over and built itself into. The sunlight filtered hazily down into the crevice so as to give it a constantly twilit feel. Zelda found herself uneasy with it, though she wasn't sure as to why.

They continued to walk for some ways until they came to a structure which had been carved into the eastern side of the crevice wall. A couple of small orc children, a boy and a girl Zelda guessed, played with wooden swords and axes near the entrance, reenacting battle after battle. As the two women approached, they stopped and stared at Shaggara in particular with a kind of awe.

"Shaggara!" The girl shouted with glee. "Shaggara's here!"

"Are you going to tell us a story? Please Shaggara?" The boy chimed

in excitedly.

Shaggara grinned. "Perhaps Shaggara will tell you a story, little ones," the orc woman said as she knelt and stroked the back of the girl's head. "But first, she must visit Matron Battlewail."

The children then turned their attention to the woman they didn't know. "You brought a friend, Shaggara? Does she tell stories too?" The girl asked.

Zelda smiled and knelt down to the girl's eye level. "I do, little one. Would you like to hear one?"

"Are they Sinâ€| Sindor..." The girl seemed to struggle with the unfamiliar word, but then finally got it out correctly, "Sindorei! Are they Sin-dor-ei stories? We've never heard any from the elven lands before."

"Well..." Zelda looked at a loss as to how to explain her predicament without disappointing the girl.

"Shaggara's friend is not from Silvermoon, but Shaggara has no doubt that her stories will be exotic and exciting nonetheless." Shaggara spoke up, coming to her rescue. "Come, let us speak with the matron, and then you will get your stories."

The children's eyes went wide and then they both rushed into the building calling out, "Matron Battlewail! Matron Battlewail! Shaggara's here and she brought a friend to tell us stories! Come!"

"They're adorable!" Zelda said. "Is this a school of some kind?" She asked.

"This is Orgrimmar's orphanage." Shaggara replied. "These two children are but a few of dozens the matron cares for in her old age. More are added it seems every time I visit." Her voice took on a haunted tone.

"Oh." Zelda said, not sure of what to say after that. Castle Town in Hyrule had a small orphanage as well, and it was well funded by her father. But she could always count the number of children there on one hand, two when it became full.

"Matron Battlewail raised Gryshka and Shaggara long ago in the internment camps after the first invasion by the Horde into Azeroth, after our parents were killed by Alliance, human, soldiers. We were her first orphans. Somehow, even after truces and treaties are signed by both sides, she continues to receive more young ones to look after." Shaggara told her, the orc woman's voice weary and tired.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." Zelda told her, still at a loss for words.

"The past is the past. Shaggara honors both the mother who gave her life, and the matron who raised her as a mother. But Shaggara worries for these little ones. Matron Battlewail is strong, but old. Even one strong as her does not live forever." Shaggara replied. "Come, let us see Shaggara's adopted mother, and then maybe you might entertain us

all with a tale of your land."

Zelda nodded, "Of course. I would be honored to." She said.

"What do you mean you can't open a portal back to his homeland?" Marshall McBride stood with arms crossed, demanding answers from the Abbey's resident mage.

"I have to know where this 'Hyrule' is before I can create a link between here and there, and I've never heard of it." Khelden Bremen explained, yet again, in his own defense.

"I thought you'd traveled all over this world and Outland, mage. Perhaps your tales were a little taller than you'd led us to believe." McBride countered.

That morning, the Abbey's military commander, Link, Brother Garen, and the mage were all back in the library chamber the mage had virtually converted into his own private study. The night before had been a victory celebration of sorts, and a better welcome for their new elven guest, though he insisted on being called Hylian. Now, Marshall McBride was attempting to make good on his promise, and the mage seemed to be less than helpful this morning.

"Don't insult me Marshall." What seemed like lightning flashed briefly in the mage's eyes. "I am a member of the Kirin Tor lest you forgot."

"Then what is the problem, master mage?" McBride responded.

Khelden took a breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm himself. He then got up from where he sat and went to a bookshelf which stood against the wall. Fingering the volumes, he stopped on one large, thin one, and then withdrawing it from the shelf, brought it back to the large wooden table and opened it up, laying the book's pages bare for all present to see. He then twisted his wrist and spoke a word almost imperceptibly over the book and a soft white ball of light appeared over it, illuminating the pictures. As the rest of them glanced at the pictures they saw that the book was an atlas of their entire known world.

"Show me where this 'Hyrule' is if you please and I will gladly send him there just to get you out of my hair." The mage said, frustrated with the whole thing. "I believe Outland is on the next set of pages. Please, feel free to show me something I do not already know."

The other three men studied the place names that were so familiar to at least two of them, though Link found himself unable to read them at all. Garen and McBride went over the map of their world thoroughly, and then to Khelden's amusement, McBride turned the page looking for Outland to pour over that map as well. Finally, after some time had passed in silence, the Marshall conceded the mage's point and nodded.

Mollified, the mage then said, "If this Hyrule does exist, it is not in any world that we know of or have in the public record. This is not an impossibility. The libraries of the Kirin Tor record many, many worlds and lands that are not public or common knowledge." He then added reluctantly, "including my own knowledge."

"Why would they keep such knowledge from the rest of the world?"
Brother Garen asked.

Khelden gazed at Garen as though he were an ineffectual pupil whom he needed to tutor. "Because my dear brother priest, knowledge is power. And knowledge of certain worlds and powers is extremely dangerous were it to fall into less than responsible hands. Better to let such knowledge remain locked away and forgotten than let it loose among those who cannot handle it."

"But your fellow mages in Dalaran might know then?" McBride pressed.
"Could you open a portal for us to Dalaran to ask them?"

Link looked at Marshall McBride in surprise and then back to the mage.

"Yes, if it will allow me to go back to my research then yes! I will even write a letter to my brethren in Northrend giving my full endorsement of you if only you will leave me be!" Khelden announced in exasperation.

"Wait!" Link then spoke up, looking back and forth between the both of them. "What about Zelda? My companion. I am sworn to protect her. I must know if she is here, and if she is, then where." He pleaded with them.

"Of course you must." Brother Garen interjected paternally placing a hand on Link's shoulder. "Surely, Maester Bremen, there is some way you can help in this matter as well?"

Khelden let out a sigh of frustration, but then said calmly, "Yes. That much should be easy. Do you have anything that belonged to this companion of yours, a trinket, a piece of cloth, anything?" He asked Link.

Link thought for a moment, and then reached into a pouch he carried on his waist and withdrew a folded blue silk handkerchief. He then handed it to the mage saying, "She gave me this."

"Indeed. A favor from a lady of means. No wonder you wish to find her so badly." Khelden said nonchalantly.

Link's face blushed crimson as the mage took the piece of silk cloth and balled it into one hand. He then closed his eyes and passed his other hand over it saying a few words that were indecipherable to even Link's keen hearing. The blue silk seemed to glow in his hand as the incantation reached its end. Then the mage's eyes opened, his expression became serious.

"She is here in Azeroth." Khelden pronounced.

"Where?" Link asked.

"In Kalimdor. I could not see exactly..." He began to say but the Marshall cut him off.

"Tell us where mage. I know how accurate the locator magic is. You could tell me what room and what floor in the exact building in Darnassus if you so chose." McBride demanded.

"Fine. She is in Orgrimmar. Right now, she is visiting the orphanage in the Drag if that makes you happy." Khelden said flatly. "But there is nothing I can do to help you beyond giving you this information."

"What? Why not? You could just open a portal for us and..." McBride began to say.

"Absolutely not." Khelden said flatly. "Apparently I need to remind you that the Kirin Tor takes no sides and honors the treaties signed by both Horde and Alliance. I will not chance breaking them by being an accomplice to you setting foot in Horde territory. Or do you relish war so much that you would see the Horde invade your little corner of Azeroth once more?"

"Now see here, mage," McBride's voice began to raise as his face blanched, "How can you justify leaving the lad's lady in the hands of those Horde beasts?!"

"Better that than have not just hundreds, but thousands of those Horde beasts landing at Stormwind's docks because you wanted to play the hero and rescue her!" The mage returned the shout.

"Is there another way?" Link asked, trying to bring reason.

His voice seemed to cut through the tension and both men looked at him.

"Is there another way for me to reach Zelda?" Link asked again. "One that doesn't invite a war?"

McBride sighed and then said, "None so direct as a mage's portal, but yes. It would take much, much longer though. Days, perhaps as much as a week to reach Durotar and then we would need to find a way into Orgrimmar itself."

"And by then, who knows if your lady would even still be there?" Khelden pointed out.

Link thought for a minute, and then asked, "Is there a way to track her? I mean like a compass? Is there some way of telling where she is regardless of where she goes?"

Khelden thought for a minute and then passed his hand over the handkerchief once more, this time speaking gently to it. He then passed it back to Link saying, "Here, the silken cloth wants to find her now as much as you do, young elf. It will lead you to wherever she may be."

As Link received the cloth, he could feel it tugging on him to the west as if to say, _she's this way! Come on! What are you waiting for?_

"Thank you." Link said. "For everything."

Seeing this exchange, McBride then said, "It's settled then. My daughter is capable. I will leave her in charge of the defense of the Abbey for now until we return. We can set out for Booty Bay as soon as you are ready my friend."

"Booty Bay? You can't be serious. There's little but pirates and scoundrels in that southern cesspool." Brother Garen replied.

"True, but it is the only port in the Eastern Kingdoms that docks ships bound for the Barrens that will carry humans, unless you believe traveling through dragon infested swamps farther south would lead us to our destination sooner?" McBride responded. "And I know a few of those scoundrels who happen to owe me some favors."

Brother Garen paused and looked down at his feet closing his eyes as though hearing something no one else could. He then nodded and raised his head. "Then I will come with you. Kalimdor is not a safe place for our people. You may need a healer on your quest, and it is time I experienced more of the world outside of this abbey."

Link looked at the man with appreciation. He didn't know this world at all, or the dangers he might face. But he said, "You don't have to do that. Neither of you need come with me. I must find her, and..."

"And we must help, my son." Brother Garen responded. "It is what the Light wills."

"Indeed." McBride agreed. "I will get started on preparations and have horses saddled. We can ride as far as Goldshire and hire gryphons to ride south from there." He then said to Link, "Have no fear my friend, we will rescue your lady from her cruel fate. I promise you this."

The morning came and went in the common room of the orphanage as a ring of orc and troll children surrounded Zelda sitting crosslegged in front of her, their eyes wide and spellbound as she told them of the one tale she knew all too well. The one which kept repeating throughout her land's history. Shaggara, Matron Battlewail, and two other orc women sat behind the children, and each with a child in their laps as they listened to Zelda's legend as well.

"And then the princess of wisdom and the hero of courage used the pieces of the ancient golden power..." She continued.

"The triforce?" One child asked.

"Yes! The triforce!" She giggled as she tickled the child's clawed toes. The child, a little boy laughed and hid his face shyly as she continued.

"They used the pieces of the triforce to seal the evil king from the desert in the sacred realm where he could do no more harm to the land of Hyrule." She finished.

"Did they live happily ever after?" Another little girl asked. "Did they get married?"

"Oh!" Zelda laughed, blushing a bit. "Well, the story keeps repeating itself throughout our history at different times and in different ways. Sometimes, yes they do, and others sadly no they don't."

"Did the story happen recently?" One little boy, a blue skinned troll boy with deep thoughtful eyes asked.

Another little girl picked up on the question and chimed in, "Are you the princess of wisdom?"

Zelda smiled and then, leaning in like she was sharing a secret she said, "Well, that's my secret to keep, now isn't it?"

"Aw, no fair! Tell us!" The girl cried foul, and then the other children joined in until Matron Battlewail gently placed the child who had been sitting on her lap to the side and stood up saying, "Now children, let Zelda alone. She has been very gracious to share the legends of her people with us and we should all thank her for it. May her stories become our stories, and her wisdom ours."

"Ohhh..." some of the children whined, but then as they stood up, they all grudgingly said "Thank you, Zelda."

One little girl, an orc girl of maybe six or seven years as Zelda could determine, came up and gave her a hug, whispering as she did so, "I know it was you in the story. I hope you find your hero, Princess Zelda."

Zelda smiled and returned the hug, but said nothing as she released the little girl.

Shaggara and Matron Battlewail came to stand next to her. The matron then said, gesturing to the little girl as she did so, "A bright one she is. She has progressed in her studies far beyond the others of her age. I hope to see her trained in more than just how to spill blood."

"I would hope so too." Zelda replied.

"And I share her sentiment," the matron continued. "I hope you find your hero as well, Princess."

Zelda made to protest, but the matron put up a clawed hand to silence her. "Do not attempt to deny it. Your 'legend' sounded more of recent memory than ancient story. Do not mistake us for fools, elf girl. I have lived too long to tolerate such nonsense. I presume you still carry this power of wisdom you spoke of?"

Zelda pursed her lips, but then held up the back of her right hand showing the faint golden outline of three triangle joined into one. One of the bottom two glowed faintly but discernibly.

"I would be the fool to make such a mistake, Matron. It is only that in my land, the knowledge of these events and this legend is a closely guarded secret, as is the triforce itself. Your people have no such cycle on their land." Zelda replied. "To the children, it was only a story."

"Yet even the children saw through it." The Matron replied gesturing again to the children who had gone off to their own play. "I am afraid you must be more careful even here, child. There are those in our world, like your own, that would stop at nothing to gain the power you and your hero carry. The power to alter space, time, and reality itself with nothing but a wish? Oh yes. There are many, many who crave such power here in Azeroth and elsewhere. Imagine the great harm one might do with such power. Our orphanage is already full to bursting. Guard your story here as carefully as you would in your own

land. Do you understand?"

Zelda nodded gravely, and silently, accepting the rebuke for her lack of discretion.

"Good." The Matron softened. "I agree with my daughter, Shaggara. Someone brought you through to our world for a reason, but I do not think you landed where they intended. And now we know why." She pointed a brownish green clawed finger towards the mark on the back of Zelda's hand. "And if they brought you through, then they brought through your hero and this evil king as well."

Shaggara joined in, "Yes, Shaggara believes so as well. To obtain the golden power you all carry, there are mages and warlocks that would sacrifice many, many souls to gain the power to drag you from your world. Your presence in our world could threaten all of us. You must find your hero and go home."

"For both our worlds." Zelda agreed. "The longer the triforce is absent from Hyrule, the farther out of balance Hyrule will fall."

"Take her to the Crossroads in the Barrens, daughter. Find Gereth as quickly as you can. Perhaps he may be able to help." The Matron told Shaggara.

"I will, Matron. On my honor, I will see Zelda returned to her world or die in the attempt." Shaggara returned solemnly.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Not memories per se, but feelings of memories coursed through Link's mind and body as the wind flew over and around him. Though he had never flown on the back of one of the majestic raptor headed animals before, somehow his muscles instantly knew how to move with the white and gold colored beast as it soared through the air southwards. The feel of *deja vu* was intense, though whenever he tried to call to mind when he might have done anything similar, there was always a blank.

The beast seemed to know it as well. The gryphons he and his two companions flew upon were well trained, and, as the gryphon master explained, they would fly straight south from Goldshire to the town of Darkshire in the province of Duskwood whether there was someone riding them or not. But this gryphon, rather than keeping to its set path responded to the slightest instinctual movement of Link's either higher or lower, banking or twisting.

Link couldn't suppress the boyish grin which spread over his face at the speed and rush he felt. It was, in some ways, like riding Epona again, his mare which had accompanied him throughout his life. In some way, riding the wind on the back of a great beast like this just felt "right". And like much of these kinds of feelings and instincts, he couldn't explain it.

Trailing Link's more free flying animal were Marshall McBride and Brother Garen on their own hired animals as they flew farther and

farther south over Elwyn forest. Occasionally, the Hylian warrior would look back to make sure he hadn't lost the men who had graciously promised to help him find his lost princess and rescue her from the kinds of beasts he had been forced to slaughter the day before.

Marshall McBride looked almost bored as he held on to his gryphon, as though this kind of travel was nothing knew to him, letting the gryphon doing all the work. Once or twice, Link though he caught him with his eyes closed. In contrast, Brother Garen looked terrified, and even though his animal flew evenly and smoothly, the poor priest held on to it hunched over with white knuckles on the reins, though the animal was clearly not responding to any movements or jerks the priest made with them. Link wondered how many such passengers the gryphon was used to carrying.

They had reached Goldshire, a small town centrally located in the province of Goldshire, on horseback shortly after noon that day. After lunch in the Lion's Pride Inn, the Marshall had hired the three gryphons from the town's official gryphon master. It was then that the Marshall explained the somewhat unique system of air travel in his world.

"Yes, there are gryphon masters in most Alliance towns and all the major cities. Most of them are on the pay of either Stormwind or Ironforge here in the Eastern Kingdoms, though there are a few independent operations here and there." McBride told both the Hylian and Brother Garen, who himself had never traveled by gryphon before. "The animals themselves are well trained by their masters to fly to only certain locations and then return home on their own. This way, a man might reach a destination in a single day which might otherwise take him a week through dangerous territory on horseback. They also carry the mail from one destination to another, which is why the Alliance has a hand in their use and upkeep."

An hour after their departure, as the sun began dipping towards the west, Link observed a distinct shift in the landscape they were fast approaching. From his vantage point in the sky he could see a river, and the contrast between the north and south sides of the river was literally like the difference between day and night.

The north side of the river was cheerful, green, and summer like, as was all of Elwyn forest that Link had seen. It had reminded him strongly of the Faron woods north of where he had grown up in Ordon. But as they were approaching the south side, across the river it suddenly and starkly turned dark and foreboding. The trees were just as green and thick on the south side, but they were more obscured, even sinister as though a great shadow had fallen upon the land. A sickly fog or mist rose up from the ground.

A chill went up Link's spine as the flight of gryphons soared across the river and over the haunted landscape. What happened to this place? Link wondered. And then he wondered, How much longer 'til we cross it to this Darkshire town? And then, half an hour later the gryphons began their descent towards and into the eery region. When Link pulled up on the reins thinking it to be a mistake, his own animal, so ready to move with him earlier, wouldn't respond to his commands but was determined to land there.

The sun was beginning to set as well, which didn't help the feel of

the region.

The gryphons flew down and over the blue roofs of a seemingly larger town than Goldshire had been, though as Link came closer it did not appear to be nearly as cheerful or full of life. The mists seemed to penetrate and surround every building and structure there as well obscuring the whole town in shadows. Street lamps and building lamps were lit though there was still at least an hour or two's worth of daylight left, and with good reason. There were people walking the streets and pathways of the town, but they appeared hurried, downcast, and themselves almost lifeless as though all hope had fled from them.

Finally, the gryphons swept east towards the crest of a hill just outside of the town where they landed gently and came to a halt among a few others that appeared to be resting, their raptor like heads bent back and nestled behind a wing. Not certain of what to do next, Link remained mounted until McBride and Garen landed behind him. McBride immediate slid off his beast as easily as if it had been a horse, while Brother Garen's shaky legs struggled to find purchase as he eased himself off the feathered and furred animal. It was then, observing his companions that Link knew to dismount there though he had no peace about remaining in the haunted locale for any length of time.

Marshall McBride went straight away to the first person he could see. It was another human, a woman wearing some kind of spectacles or goggles, who looked to be tending the resting gryphons. Link came to stand next to him, though he was less than enthused by what he heard.

"I'm sorry." The woman was telling him. "The soonest I can send out another gryphon flight south may be tomorrow morning."

"Why is that?" The Marshall asked, frustrated, though not unkind. "I thought fresh gryphons were always kept available for travelers."

"And usually they are, but even my animals take ill once in a while, Marshall. And, I've already had a group hire my last few healthy ones to head west towards Westfall. They won't find their way home here until tomorrow morning." The woman responded, noting the man's rank by his armor decorations. "The animals you came in on are going to be tired from the flight to Goldshire, and, presuming they were fresh out of Goldshire, while they may be capable of pressing on to the next stop southwards in Stranglethorn, I wouldn't try it." She then said, "The Scarlet Raven has warm rooms and comfortable beds in town if you and your friends would be willing to spend a few silvers and be patient."

"We were hoping to be in Booty Bay by tomorrow morning." The Marshall told her as he looked with an unsavory expression towards the town. By the tone of his voice, Link realized McBride now knew that was unrealistic at best.

"I don't know how else to help you, Marshall." The gryphon master said.

Then McBride's expression changed, and Link could see that a thought had occurred to him.

"Our business is more urgent than that. Do you know if anyone in town might have horses for hire?" McBride asked her.

She didn't say it out loud, but the expression the gryphon master gave the Marshall was clearly understood, Are you insane? What she actually said though didn't inspire any more hope, "What kind of business could be that urgent? No one travels the roads of Duskwood anymore, not unless they're fools or mad."

"Why?" Link asked.

Then it was as if the gryphon master had first noticed him as she seemed to appraise him like she appraised one of her precious flying mounts. After a few seconds she replied, "Look around you, Sir Elf. The light has abandoned Duskwood just as surely as I heard it abandoned much of your own homelands in the north. Soon, there will be nothing left of us here but the damned ghouls and worgen that have taken our fields and farms; not that Stormwind cares."

This last part she said under her breath followed by what sounded like a few choice words that Link didn't understand. There was a flash of anger with her words, but then it was gone. Replaced only with a hopeless resignation.

Marshall McBride looked as though he would reply to this, but then held his tongue.

"The Light abandons no one, my daughter." Brother Garen spoke up from behind the Marshall, his voice paternal and concerned. "Be at peace."

"I wish that were true, brother priest." The gryphon master replied, some sadness behind her words.

The older man stepped forward in his robes to put his hand on the woman's shoulder, he then closed his eyes and said a few words. As he did so, the hand on her shoulder glowed with a soft white light. Her eyes began to water, and she took his hand and said, "Thank you, brother. I'm sorry. It's just been so hard on all of us here for several years now."

"I know my daughter, but the Light abandons no one, and shines brightest among the darkest nights. It is when things become their darkest that the Light is most clearly seen." Brother Garen told her gently.

"Thank you," she said, sniffing back tears, "for your words of encouragement, brother. It's been hard without my parents."

It was then that Link realized the gryphon master wasn't much older than he himself was, and he had seen all of eighteen summers pass in his own world. He recognized in her a young woman who had tried to remain strong for too long, only to see her world get worse, and not better.

Under his breath, and imperceptible for all present but Link to be able to hear, McBride muttered angrily, "Damned Horde."

After a minute where no one knew what to say, the gryphon master

regained some control over her emotions and said, "The armorsmith in town, Morg, he keeps a few horses out behind the smithy for when he needs to bring his wares in his wagon to the next province, but he hasn't been able to for over a year now. It's been too dangerous. You might see if he'd be willing to hire them or sell them to you for gold. It'd be more than he's seen in a while."

"Thank you, lady. It is most appreciated." Marshall McBride told her. He then reached into a pouch he carried on a belt under his armor and, pinching his fingers together, he pressed something into the young woman's hand, closing his own around it so that Link couldn't see what it was, though he heard the distinctive clink of many pieces of precious metal. The Marshall said as he did so, "For your helpâ€| and your parents."

The woman nodded her thanks and pocketed the clinking coins which seemed to weigh down her coin purse much more heavily than it had been before.

When they had taken their leave and begun their walk down the hill and into the town, the Marshall opened up and began speaking, though it sounded as if it were to himself just as much as it had been to either Link or the priest.

"I remember when this town was called Grand Hamlet. It was a jewel. My wife, may she rest in the Light, daughter and I would vacation here when Lucinda was just a babe in arms really. Those were more peaceful times." There was an anger, and an emotion in his voice that he had obvious trouble containing.

Link didn't know what to say as he observed their surroundings. "Jewel" would not be the description he would give it.

"If it wasn't for the damned Horde, Stormwind could afford to send troops and supplies to relieve these people." McBride continued.

"I thought there was a treaty." Link said. "That's what the mage said."

"Oh, there is." McBride snorted. "They don't step into lands we claim, and we don't step into theirs, but there are plenty of lands here in Azeroth that they claim that were never theirs. The treaties call them 'contested lands'." McBride spat the word. "Not far from here to the east is the fortress of Marshtide Watch in what we now call the Swamp of Sorrows, one of those 'contested lands'. Every day good human, dwarf, and even Draenei men and women fight to reclaim those wetlands that they stole from us. Not to mention those parts of our own, human, ancestral homelands in the Arathi Highlands far to the north of us that they've settled into and refuse to relinquish. The great city of Stromgarde is in ruins because of it. And what happened to Lordaeron and Gilneasâ€| We have no one to send here, no one to send anywhere, no ability to help whatsoever, and it kills all of us who know about it every day. And it's all because of those damned orcs, their damned Horde, and the hell they unleashed on Azeroth the minute they set foot here through their damned portal!"

The air of the oncoming night was chill as they continued their walk into town, and people who had been out on their own business seemed to be in twice the hurry to get where they were going as what

daylight there was vanished quickly. Soon, the only people they met on the cobblestone roads of the town were leather and chain mail clad members of what Marshall McBride referred to as the town's "Night Watch." Those brave souls who stood guard over its remaining citizens during the hours between dusk and dawn.

"We used to have a farm, a pumpkin farm, not far from here, my wife and I." The Marshall began again. "My lands weren't large, but they had been in my family since before my grandfather's time. Come harvest time, my wife, the Light give her rest, she used to bake the sweetest pumpkin pies you had ever tasted. We'd bring them to market here inâ€¦ in..." His voice began to crack with emotion. "Damned orcs." He finally said after several minutes.

Link's heart ached for the man's loss. He didn't need to press him for the details. He understood now only too well.

"I think the smithy is this way, near the town hall." McBride said, steadyng his voice again. "The sooner we leave this Light forsaken place the better."

The sun shone hard until the sun went down behind the western mountains, and Zelda wondered until the sun disappeared how any place could be that hot and not be total desert. But the view across the land from the town known only as "The Crossroads" was that of savannah, and yellowing grasslands. In the distance to the east, and much nearer to the south west could be seen rocky hills and low mountains jutting up from the earth like monuments the land erected to its own greatness. It was majestic and breathtaking in its own right.

Single horned horse-like creatures which Shaggara had called "zhevras" roamed the savannah plains freely in sight of the town to the east alongside large, flightless birds the orc woman had named "plainstriders."

They had arrived late in the day on the backs of winged, lion like creatures which Shaggara had told her were commonly called "Wind Riders" which members of the Horde used and hired frequently to move quickly across their extensive lands in Kalimdor. Zelda found the experience flying on the back of the great beast exhilarating and even somewhat familiar, though she couldn't remember ever doing anything like it before.

The Crossroads was essentially a small Horde outpost with a watchtower, an inn, and a few shops and tradesmen who made their living from all those passing through to the four corners of the continent of Kalimdor.

Several tall totem poles with carved, horned bovine heads atop them could be seen around the town, and, except for the watchtower, and the inn which served as its base and were made of earth, stone, and wood frames which were clearly of Orc design, the rest of the structures had been erected from wooden poles and thick animal hides. A kind of windmill made from wood frames and animal hides turned over a well with the breezes which swept through the town. It felt temporary and tribal, like the entire town could pack up at a moment's notice and relocate. It felt deeply connected to the earth and the natural forces around them.

Besides those orcs that oversaw the administration and policed it, several of the blue skinned trolls, and those smaller, green skinned people called Goblins, Zelda found that at least half of the town's inhabitants were from a tall, muscular, and proud race of bovine peoples which Shaggara called "Tauren." Those Tauren Zelda encountered seemed stern but kind. When she looked into their eyes she saw a wisdom and a peace in them that she had rarely encountered from any other singular race before.

When they landed, they set out immediately to locate the only mage Shaggara seemed to trust, a man named Gereth. Shaggara inquired from many different people, but no one seemed to know of him. As the darkness of night set in and the stars began to shine their brightest Shaggara ran out of townsfolk to inquire from. It was then they joined the other folk passing through in the traveler's inn for the night.

The "inn" was a single large domed room at the base of the tower. A low round table with a cooking fire and a hot plate stood in the center. Towards the back were carefully stacked wooden barrels with spigots. In front of them stood a not so fearsome looking orc man who was carefully filling mugs from the spigots with a dark brown liquor and handing them to some goblin patrons across a couple of low round tables which had been pushed close together to form a rough bar. Around the large room stood braziers with burning coals which provided most of the lighting, and several low to the ground wooden beds with stuffed feather mattresses carefully covered with clean white linen sheets and brown woolen blankets. That night, there were only a few fellow travelers that chose to stay there.

Sweeping the wooden floor with a well used straw broom was a large white Tauren male with keen, friendly eyes, a brass nose ring, and a ragged gray beard under his muzzle. He wore a green leather tunic, and gray leather pants with matching gloves and boots. His horns were long, pronounced, and sharp, and he hummed a sprightly melody as he worked. Noticing the two newcomers enter the inn, he called out to them.

"So, did you find out anything more about your mage friend?" He asked, his voice deep and rich.

"No, no one seems to know anything about him." Shaggara said as she and Zelda approached the Tauren.

He stopped his sweeping for the moment and turned to face them. "It's not surprising. We get so many new faces passing through from all directions and to all directions, even I can't keep track of everyone and I usually remember most of the folks that pass through, even if not their names. He must not have been here too long, but that describes almost everyone." Scratching his chin for a minute, he then asked, "Where was your friend from?"

"Brill, in Tirisfal Glades." Shaggara told him.

"Ahhhâ€|. That explains a little more. The Forsaken tend to keep to themselves and their own, and quite frankly there are few that would try to draw them out if they had no business with them. I doubt your friend even troubled anyone in town with his name even if he had passed through." The Tauren explained.

"Are there any other cities or towns west of here that a mage might have been interested in enough to travel to?" Zelda asked.

The big Tauren answered as he continued his sweeping, "Well, there's my home town of Thunderbluff out west and south of here in Mulgore, but that's more of a draw for those interested in elemental or nature magic not the Arcane, or so I hear. Otherwise, far to the south there's the goblin town of Gadgetzan, but unless he's just passing through to somewhere else I don't know why a mage would want to go there. Same with Winterspring in the north." He then asked her, "First time in Kalimdor?"

"Yes." Zelda answered honestly.

"Well, we're a little rough around the edges; some of us more than others, but you'll find most of us here in the western lands to be good, honest people. My name's Boorand. Boorand Plainswind. I run this little hostel of ours here in town. What's yours?"

"Zelda." She answered.

"That's an unusual name for one of the Sindorei." He responded, stopping his sweeping. He stood his broom straight up and put both of his hands over the tip.

"So I've been told." She responded, growing a little wary at his interest in her.

Seeing her discomfort, he backed off his line of questioning. He'd run his business long enough to know when a guest wanted to keep their business their own. Then, he closed his eyes and seemed to be trying to remember something as his forehead seemed to scrunch and his eyelids tightened.

When he opened them, he said, "You know, now that I think about it, I did have a Forsaken man come through, oh about a week back or so. I never caught his name, but I do think I saw him talking to Larhka over there before he left."

The Tauren motioned to the orc serving drinks to the three goblins who seemed to be trying to drink each other under the makeshift bar. The orc said nothing, but took their silver with each drink he handed them.

"You might want to ask him. I only bring it up because it's kind of unusual to see one of the Forsaken at the bar there at all. I don't think I've ever seen any of them ever eat or drink anything come to think of it; at least nothing we can serve here." Boorand told them.

"Thank you, Boorand." Zelda told him.

"No problem." The Tauren innkeeper replied. "Let me know if I can help you ladies any more than that. Oh, and take any bed you can find. We don't have too many folks tonight, so there should be plenty to go around." He then said with some pride, "I run a clean establishment for my guests. If you find anything dirty or not right somehow, let me know and I'll take care of it for you."

He then pointed a thumb at the three small green patrons that were

clearly unable to stand up on there own any longer. "One of these goblin fellows drinks too much and starts getting too friendly, let me know and he's gone. I won't have any of that in my place. Breakfast is eggs and pork ribs from Durotar at sunup. Don't ask me where I get the eggs from, just believe me when I say you've never tasted omelets like these before. I might even have some Blackrock coffee if you'd like some brewed in the morning. I don't usually drink it, but I keep some on hand in case I have guests who're interested."

"Coffee in the morning would be lovely, thank you, Boorand." Zelda replied graciously.

"Thank you again for your kindness." Shaggara told him as well.

Boorand smiled and nodded and went back to his work, continuing to hum the same melody as before. The two women then approached the "barkeep" towards the back of the common room.

By the time they had reached the "bar", none of the three goblins were still on their feet, and only one appeared conscious enough to even put his mug in front of Larhka for him to fill it, which the orc did once more silver coins had been laid on the table.

Taking his mug again, the goblin gave a valiant effort to bring it to his lips, but just as Zelda thought he might actually achieve his goal, the poor creature went over backwards, spilling the grainy smelling liquor all over himself. The goblin himself didn't care as he was passed out cold. Off across the room, the innkeeper snorted in disgust, but strangely he made no effort to clean it up or remove the creatures from his inn.

"Shouldn't you have cut them off long before this?" Zelda asked the barkeep.

Larhka looked at her with a wily grin and replied, "Better three drunk goblins sleeping it off all night, than three sober goblins causing trouble all night. Goblins are tougher than they look, they'll be fine. And now, so will everyone else."

Zelda smirked at his answer, appreciating the sly but practical cunning of the orc.

Shaggara spoke next, "The innkeeper tells us you spoke with a Forsaken man who passed through here a week ago. Do you know where he might have gone next?"

Larhka eyed Shaggara and Zelda pensively, as though appraising who was asking. His caution wasn't lost on Zelda. _He definitely knows something_, she thought. _But he doesn't know if we're the right people to reveal it to._

"He's a friend of ours," Zelda than said as sincerely as she could. "His name is Gereth."

"He never told me his name." Larhka finally said. "But yes, I remember him. Not too often one of them comes up to buy a drink from me. Said he just wanted to remember what it tasted like. Something about a tavern in Lordaeron a long time ago."

"That was him." Shaggara confirmed. "He told me about the tavern in his home town before the plague many times."

"Yeah, what was the name of that town again?" Larhka asked, keeping his eyes on Shaggara, watching her for her answer warily.

"Andorhal. Gereth was from Andorhal before the Scourge overran it." Shaggara replied without hesitating.

Larhka nodded, "You're right, it was Andorhal." Eying Shaggara and Zelda again he said in his deep, raspy orc voice. "Yeah, he talked to me about that and a few other things. I don't usually pry, but people tend to talk a lot when they drink. When they do, I try to keep what they say between them and me. You know what I mean? Though, to be honest I didn't expect one of them to open up like that. I didn't know the drink could have that effect on one of them. Maybe he just felt like talking. Either way..."

Zelda listened to everything the two orcs were saying about the man they were looking for, but not everything was making sense to her. What was the Scourge? Why did they keep referring to this man as "forsaken" and "one of them"? There was a noticeable but slight shudder in the orc's disposition when he mentioned him as well.

"Either way, seeing as you're a friend of his, he talked a lot about his life before the Scourge." Larhka continued as he poured another mug of the liquor, then took a swig of it himself. "There was the usual anger and bitterness you see in one of them when they talk about their lives before, but there was something else too. He said he was traveling up into the elven lands to the northwest, to the old Kaldorei ruins up in Ashenvale. He said he was researching something that might be able to fix everything, something he had heard about from one of his friends in the Kirin Tor in Dalaran. He thought there might beâ€| Oh, how did he put it, 'the last piece of the puzzle' to figuring out how to make or conjure one of these things; something he called a 'golden flame'."

"A golden flame?" Zelda asked, her intuition beginning to stir.

"Yeah, he mentioned something about a fire elemental called 'Blazerunner' way out in Un'goro Crater years ago that he had read about in some journal. Some adventurer went out and killed it and took this 'golden flame' from the monster trying to finish a job another had started. Last anyone heard, he said, it had been returned to one of the ruined elven cities in Ashenvale."

"You remember a lot." Shaggara observed.

"Like I said, it isn't often one of them comes and talks to me. And it was a good story he told. I'm not great at it, but sometimes I try my hand at storytelling to entertain the guests, especially when we've got little ones. It's not often but it does happen. I'm always on the lookout for new stuff." Larhka told her in reply.

Shaggara nodded in understanding. "Did he say anything else?"

"Just something about a 'sword of mastery' or something somehow being

connected to the whole thing, like some kind of key." He replied.

Zelda stiffened, though she tried to not let it show. "Like a master sword?" She asked innocently.

"Yeah. You know, I think that's what he called it too. He said, 'the master sword's the key to it'. Those were his exact words. You know what he was talking about? Cause I'd like to know just to make it a better story when I tell it." The barkeep said, looking back and forth between the two women.

But Zelda didn't reply as her mind raced. Shaggara too, looked pensive as she remembered Zelda's own story from earlier in the day in Orgrimmar. Finally, Shaggara said, "Perhaps. Thank you, Larhka. You've helped us greatly."

"Yeah, no problem. I kind of hope he finds what he was looking for. He seemed like a decent fellowâ€œ for one of them I mean. Shame what the Scourge did to him and his people." The male orc replied.

The triangle emblem burned with a golden light on the back of Zelda's hand and she moved to cover it so that the barkeep didn't see. As it did so, her mind was filled with familiar, yet unknown images of a people and a history she had never encountered before. And a certain golden triangle, wreathed in golden flames stood at the center of them all.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5

The night was dark, darker than anything Link could remember as he, Marshall McBride, and Brother Garen trotted their horses west along the main road which ran through the whole of the province of Duskwood. Even the oil lamps, hung on short wooden posts every so often to help light the road for those adventuresome travelers who dared it, did little to alleviate the darkness except to point out where the road may be in the distance.

There was also a damp chill in the air as the mist worked its way through cloaks, tunics, and breaches to reach skin and bone. It left Link shivering regardless of the fur lined, wolf's hide cloak he had acquired from the armorsmith.

The eery feel to the land was everywhere his head turned as they rode, and it prompted them to push their newly purchased horses even faster. Several times Link would swear he had seen pairs of glowing red eyes watching him from off the road behind a bush, or up on a hill.

"We need to keep moving," was all Marshall McBride would say when the Hylian would mention it.

The plan had been to try and reach a small, but semi-permanent encampment of soldiers of which he had been informed that were on the northern edge of the Jungle region known as Stranglethorn Vale. The region lay directly south of Duskwood, and there was a road the Marshall knew of in the cursed land which led there. They had hoped

to reach the encampment before dawn, and then hire gryphons to continue down to Booty Bay from there.

But as the night wore on, and Link watched Brother Garen slump over in his saddle more than once before being shaken awake again, it became clear to him that they were going to need to stop and make camp somewhere. He also knew that even the hardiest horses couldn't keep up their pace all night without rest.

"Marshall, we need to stop and make camp." Link pulled up next to the man and told him.

"Not here. Not in Duskwood." The Marshall replied, his own expression haunted. "It's not safe."

"Brother Garen is falling asleep in his saddle, and you know as well as I that no horse can keep up this pace for hours without end. Even if we can make it without rest, they will collapse before we ever make it out of this province." Link pointed out. "There has to be somewhere here where we can rest the horses for a few hours."

"You don't understand what roams these woods, elf. Better to sacrifice the horses than ourselves." The Marshall responded stubbornly.

They continued to ride for some time, and then, just off the road to their left, Link spied what looked like an old farmhouse. Its dried out wooden boards ragged appearance told Link that whoever had built it had been gone for a long time. No lights were seen coming from the glass set windows.

"What about that old farmhouse over there just off the road?" Link pointed for the soldier. "It looks abandoned, and it looks large enough to pull the horses inside to protect them if we need to."

McBride looked in the direction that the Hylian pointed, but could barely make out the outline of the building. "You've got good eyes, elf, if you can see all that in this darkness." He remarked.

"It's better than wasting good horses." Link replied.

Though the truth was, "good horses" was a stretch in describing the broken down black geldings the blacksmith had sold them. True, they could still carry a man, and travel a distance, and they didn't have any broken legs but that was all that was going for them. Link missed his mare, Epona. She had been a good companion and a good friend to him. Epona might have made it all the way through if the need was that great. She had never let him down before.

"Fine." The Marshall conceded, and the three directed their animals off the road and down an overgrown path towards the abandoned farmhouse.

The closer they got, the more Link could see that at one time it had been part of a large and well kept estate. It was a two story structure. Blue painted shingles still graced the roof, though many had fallen away in patches. Weather beaten white paint peeled from the sides of the building. Glass windows could be seen on both levels, though a few had been broken and never repaired. The front of

the house held grand, double doors that had also, at one time, been painted a royal blue. These now stood partially and haphazardly open.

As they pulled up to the front steps of the house, Marshall McBride dismounted saying, "The doors look large enough, and the wood still looks sturdy. Let's bring the horses in. I'll take first watch. We leave before dawn."

Inside the house there was a large common room, and it was apparent that the house had, once upon a time entertained many guests. But now it was silent, much of the rich furniture that had once graced the old farmhouse lay in disrepair and covered in dust and streaks of the mold which seemed to be everywhere. Still, there were a few pieces that seemed to have survived the ravages of time and the mist and these were put into use by the three men. They brought the horses into the grand common room through the front doors, tying them to a still sturdy staircase railing, and then pulled the doors shut. They would not secure though, as the latches had rusted away long ago. As McBride lit a lantern and searched the room, he spied an old piano against a wall. He and Link then pushed it against the doors to secure them against the as yet unseen things outside as best they could.

As promised, Marshall McBride took the first watch while Brother Garen stretched out on a long padded couch. Link found a chair which still held some of it's padding and attempted to close his eyes, having agreed to take the second watch after the human soldier.

But try as he might, sleep would not come. It was ironic because of how many times, justifiably, those closest to him, few though they might be, accused him of being lazy or sleeping when he should have been paying attention. But that night, no matter how late it might have gotten, sleep would not come to him.

The unnatural silence of the farmhouse and the surrounding area deafened his elvish ears. Link had grown up in the woods and near the woods. He knew what the sounds of the forest and farmland should be. Yet he heard none of them. It was as though he were in a tomb, and he knew the feel of tombs all too well.

It had only been the year before when the "Hero" had awoken within him. Before that, he had just been an orphan goat herd in a small, unknown village in the province of Ordon south of the Faron Woods. Although not technically a part of the kingdom of Hyrule, Ordon held some minor trade with Lanayru and Eldin provinces and its surrounding farms and villages. Link's village held one of the best blacksmiths in the province, a man named Rusl who had been like a father to him. That was before the demon king had broken free of his bonds, and Links world had been turned upside down. He had been thrown against horror after horror in order to rescue the crown princess of Hyrule and seal that same demon king back into his prison in what had once been the sacred realm once again. Great monstrous spiders, their fangs dripping with deadly, acidic poison; faceless death knights wielding impossible large hammers and ball-chain maces; fearsome fire breathing dragons that wanted nothing more than to make him their next meal; he had faced all of them. The golden power which he discovered he carried within his very soul drove him and pushed him to ever greater acts of heroism and courage; some of them so unbelievable, he had neglected to relate to anyone for fear of them

calling him a liar.

And he had suffered a deep personal loss in the form of the companion, his best friend since he could remember, who had traveled with him and had sacrificed herself in order to save him and seal the Demon King, Ganondorf, away. When he did sleep at night, it was her sad, but smiling face that he saw, right as she died. This is what woke him in the middle of the night, screaming her name, his sheets soaked with sweat in the Hero's chamber in the Castle.

It was also the reason why he seemed to be so lazy during the day. He just couldn't sleep at night.

The only one who knew about Ilia's act of selfless bravery had been Zelda, and this because the Princess had been there when it happened. Link himself couldn't bring himself to talk about it, and she never brought it up with him or anyone else.

Zelda had, as much as her own duties had allowed her, stepped into Ilia's place in his life. He didn't know why, but he felt a connection to the princess that he didn't understand, and she seemed unusually comfortable around him as well, as though they had known each other all their lives. She became his best friend even as he became her "bodyguard", though she seemed to be "grooming" him for more than that.

In the distance, a wolf howled into the night, though it was like no wolf Link had ever heard before. The cry was more sorrowful, more savage, and more blood curdling than he would've thought possible.

Link's eyes flew open at the sound and looked towards where Marshall McBride had been standing near the window. The lamp which they had lit had been doused. McBride must have heard the Hylian warrior stir, because he held the index finger of his right hand up to his lips, indicating that he wanted Link to remain silent. The soldier's other hand held his own sword, the blade kept low lest it catch any light and reflect it back out the window.

Link's own left hand slowly went to the sword on his own back, carefully drawing it so as not to make a sound. He then slowly got up from his chair and held his position, all of his senses now alert and probing.

On the couch, Brother Garen was still asleep, oblivious to anything that might be amiss. Link decided he was better that way at the moment. Sincere though the man might be, he was no warrior.

His sharp ears caught the sound of footpads striking dirt and fallen leaves outside, though he could not tell if it was on two legs or four. Then he heard the animal like growling coming from outside. There was one, no twoâ€¦ no, that was a third creature.

Link held up three fingers to McBride, but he couldn't see them in the darkness. Then he carefully and lightly tapped on the wooden arm of the chair three times, hoping the man understood. Still watching the window, McBride nodded in response and held up three fingers as well for the Hylian to see.

Then the movement outside stopped dead, and there was nothing for

several seconds except the sound of something large, perhaps as large as a man, sniffing at the air.

Link hadn't been conscious of it at first, but he realized after a minute that he hadn't been breathing as his heart began to race. Thenâ€¦

CRASH!

Glass shattered everywhere as a huge hulking form with flashing red eyes smashed through the front window, landing on all fours just past Marshall McBride. The horses screamed and winnied in panic, causing more confusion and disorientation.

It lunged for the Hylian warrior, but found itself smashing into an empty chair and landing clumsily on the floor. Outside lightning flashed from nowhere and it began to rain hard. Between the flashes of light, Link caught the glimpse of sharp canine teeth and scarred, furred elongated lupine nose as the creature turned towards him and lunged again.

He slammed the beast back hard with his shield. The creature's sharp teeth and muzzle smashing violently against the shield. Link brought his sword up from behind him to slice towards the wolf like creature's midsection.

Then the animal darted out of the way, rearing back on two, man-like legs. And with the next flash of lightning, he saw that the creature's front claws were attached to the five fingers of very mannish hands.

"Worgen!" McBride yelled as another creature dove through the broken window after the first, only this time, McBride stood ready with his sword as he stabbed upwards towards the monster's belly, slicing its underside from neck to manhood. The creature fell, it's innards slick on the decrepit old wooden floor.

"What?!" Link yelled back.

"Man-worgs!" McBride responded as the third came through, taking advantage of the Marshall's distraction.

"What's a worg?!" Link shot back as his sword-arm was given a full workout. He had never seen a monster so quick in its reflexes.

Then the creature swiped with it's claws and caught Link on his shield arm just in between the protection of his chain mail and leather gauntleted forearm. Blood began to seep from the wound, and Link realized it was more than just a lucky strike. This monster was calculating as it pressed its attack hard.

Link couldn't worry about the third worgen, all of his battle reflexes were now focused on just this one. The mark on his left hand began to glow brightly and the Courage began to take him. Once more time seemed to slow down and he began to be able to see the worgen's attacks before they happened, but only just.

Link ignored the pain in his arm, though it burned in a way he hadn't experience before. He bashed the animal creature hard again in the head, dizzying it for just a split second, but that was all he needed

as his sword came around in a backhand and slit the worgen's throat so hard that it nearly decapitated the beast.

The dead body fell at Link's feet, spilling it's own life blood across the floorboards. But Link had no time to inspect the body as Marshall McBride had a worgen of his own to deal with, and he found the man nearly pinned down by the beast. The only thing which saved his life, Link knew, was the solid plate armor his whole body seemed to be encased in that the worgen's fangs and claws just couldn't seem to penetrate.

But just as he turned to challenge the next beast, his head began to swoon, and his vision began to blur, and the burning sensation in his arm became worse and worse. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was the form a of a huge bird of prey swooping in through the window, talons outstretched towards the worgen. The cry of a raptor filled the house, and then strangely turned into the snarling, raging roar of a great bear.

The horses screamed again. And then all was dark.

"The infection's progressed too rapidly," a voice, a male voice Link didn't recognize, was saying nearby. "The claws probably had saliva on them, if I were to guess. None of my potions will stop it now."

"Are you saying the creature meant to do this to him?" The kindly, concerned voice of Bother Garen spoke up.

"I can't say about the wild ones, though they're certainly just as intelligent as you or I, brother priest." The male voice said again in an almost academic, though kindly tone. "You are both extremely lucky that you yourselves weren't infected. You in particular, Marshall. It is a difficult burden for anyone to bear."

Link heard metal beat against metal, and the Marshall's voice saying, "Imperial Plate forged from thorium from the second war. It was a gift from my father. This isn't the first time it has saved me."

As Link's sense returned to him, he found himself lying on a comfortable mattress in a well lit room. Too lit, in fact for it to still be at night. He opened his eyes and found dim sunlight filtering through a window opened to allow fresh air to flow through the room. His tunic, chain-mail, undershirt, and gauntlets had all been removed and a well thought bandage with a sweet smelling herbal poultice had been wrapped around his injured arm.

"Where am I?" Link asked, his senses returning to him quickly and sharply. Upon seeing the newcomer, a dark haired man with sharp, handsome aquiline features and a long flowing mustache wearing a red and brown leather kilt and jacket, he then asked, "Who are you?"

The three other men in the room turned towards him as he tried pushing himself up.

"Good, you're awake." The new man told him. "I was beginning to wonder how long it would be."

"I don't understand." Link said as he looked back and forth between his two previous companions. "Where am I? What happened to the

farmhouse? How did we get here?" He felt disoriented.

The looks on McBride's and Brother Garen's faces were apologetic, concerned, and even sad as though there were some terrible news that they didn't want to tell him, but couldn't avoid. Only the newcomer seemed less apologetic and more concerned with Link's current care.

"Are you a healer?" Link asked him.

The dark haired man came closer to stand at the side of Link's bed. He then pulled a wooden chair from a nearby desk in the room they were in and sat down next to him, placing his arms on his legs.

"I have some skill in healing if that's what you mean." The man answered. "As to my name, I am called Oliver, Oliver Harris, and this is the Scarlet Raven Inn in Darkshire. Your companions and I brought you here last night after the worgen attack. Do you remember anything about it?"

Link thought back to the fight, though his memory of it was crude and a bit fuzzy. He remembered the creature's lupine features in the flashing lightning, the fangs and claws slashing and biting at him with abandon, and then a quick strike, a lucky hit on his arm.

"My arm was cut by the creature's claws, and thenâ€| I blacked out."

"Yes. So your friends told me. I'm afraid your injury wasâ€| infected by the worgen. Sometimes they lick their claws before an attack in an attempt to increase their numbers." The man explained, his manner professional and somewhat clinical. "I'm afraid there's nothing I can do to stop down the infection now. It took too long to bring you back to town and retrieve my supplies from Raven Hill to begin brewing an antidote. By the time I returned it had spread too far."

"What infection?" Link asked, not understanding what the man was saying. "Am I going to die?"

Oliver Harris looked at the other men in the room with a curious look on his face, and then back to Link. "Do you not understand what happens when a worgen bites you, but does not kill you?"

Link's mind raced, but came up empty. "No." He answered, a sense of foreboding building.

"Perhaps then I need to show you what you must expect to happen to you within the next few days. Please do not be alarmed, I am perfectly in control of myself the entire time, and I can teach you to be the same." Oliver told him.

"I don't understand." Link said.

Oliver got up from where he sat in his chair and backed away from the bed a little, giving himself ample space for whatever demonstration he was going to give.

"Please, remain calm." He said one last time.

Then, the man's face began to contort and change in excruciatingly

painful ways. His whole body seemed to shift and grow larger. Dark fur began to sprout all over his face, neck, and hands; and his hands grew more monstrous and less human, the fingernails shifting into sharp claws. His jaws and nose elongated out to a muzzle, and his ears grew longer and sharper into something decidedly more wolf like. His back arched as the radical changes took place and he seemed to writhe in a pain he refused to give into.

When the transformation was finished, Link looked with some horror as the man seemed to have gone, and what remained now wearing his clothes was the same beast which had attacked Link.

Oliver Harris was a worgen.

"I'm sorry, my friend. This is your fate as well. You will make your first transformation in a matter of days from now, if that." Came a raspier version of the healer's voice from the face of the monster, his hands gesturing kindly as he spoke. "But I can help you learn to use it in your travels, and other forms, if you will let me."

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6

They had left the following day, early in the morning just after sun up. Marshall McBride and Brother Garen had been told to stay where they were in their rooms in the Scarlet Raven, much to the military man's dislike. He swore several times with a string of foreign profanities that Link had never heard of. But the mysterious worgen man, whom Link learned was Gilnean by birth, would not relent.

"He and I must do this alone. Where we are going, you cannot follow. We will not be gone long, three days at most, and our destination is here within Duskwood. This is all I can tell you." Oliver had said solemnly to the two men. "But we must do this before his transformation is complete."

"I will not stay one more night in this town. I can't." McBride told the man, a pleading look in his eyes. "And I swore to see him through this."

"Then take your priest friend and meet us in Stormwind three days from now. There is an inn there called the Gilded Rose. I know the innkeeper Allison well. She is a friend of the Cenarion Circle. She can be trusted." Oliver told him.

"I swore to see this man find his companion in Kalimdor. That is why we were traveling south, as I told you." McBride stubbornly persisted.

"Then you must let me take him and equip him for what lies ahead." Oliver smoothly returned.

As the two men, Oliver had resumed his more "human" appearance, reached a small, almost imperceptible path which led north off the road, Link thought back to the exchange which had occurred earlier that morning. The truth was the enigmatic worgen healer had been silent during their three hour ride west down the road. He hadn't told Link anything about where they were going, or what was to happen

when they arrived.

For his part, Link felt stronger since the day before. The truth was, he felt stronger, sharper, and faster than he ever had in his life. His senses, already keener than his human companions or those friends back in Ordon, became even more heightened. His sense of smell had exploded a hundred fold over the last day as he could smell scent trails of various animals, four footed and otherwise, for miles around. He was surprised when he realized he could tell the difference between the two human men he had been traveling with and Oliver by scent alone.

Up ahead, he could tell the scent was changing from the rest of the woods as the path led up into rocky hills. The air was fresher, sweeter, and filled with the scent of living, growing trees, and grass, and animals instead of the continuous decay and mold which pervaded the entire region around him. The scent of death and deterioration filled his nostrils from Darkshire up until this point, but not in whatever lay ahead of him.

"You smell it, don't you, Link?" Oliver asked as they rode the horses up the overgrown path. It was the first time since they left that he attempted to make conversation.

Link nodded, but said nothing.

"It is the same scent I caught when I first encountered you back in that abandoned farmhouse. It is the scent of the wild forest, of nature in harmony and balance. I have never encountered that scent from one of your kind before, and when I did, I knew that I needed to bring you here. I needed to bring you to her somehow." Oliver told him.

"I don't understand." Link replied. He realized he had been saying that a lot lately, and it was beginning to grate on him. There was so much he needed to understand about this world and he didn't have the time, it seemed.

"No, I expect you don't." The worgen man replied. "A long time ago, a great gift was given to the Kaldorei, those we humans call the 'night elves' by the Great Green Dragon Ysera who guards the realm of the Emerald Dream. Many of them were given the power of nature, to work in harmony with it and learn its secrets in order to help maintain the balance of life and keep order in this world. These were the first of my order, the first Druids. Much, much later, many thousands of years in fact, the Kaldorei chose to entrust this gift and teach it to other races as well. At some time in the ancient past, they also chose to share it with only one human kingdom, the kingdom of Gilneas. Regardless of our political differences, regardless of whether we are Horde or Alliance we all share the same goal of keeping this world in balance. The pact we make with Ysera for this gift is that we must spend time asleep, immersed in the Emerald Dream that is our world the way it should have been; natural, raw, and unspoiled by our so-called 'intelligent' life."

"And what does that have to do with me?" Link asked.

"You have the smell of a child of the green dragon, as though you were born of Ysera herself." Oliver replied. "I know of many of my people who have learned to live with, and even somewhat control, the

beast that rages inside of us, but none so well as those who have been blessed with Ysera's gift. I do not see the future, much less your future, but I feel as though your destiny is intertwined as much with the future of our world as it is your own. I would have you stand before Ysera and let her make her own judgments, and if she wills, I would teach you the way of the Druid, as much as I know. Regrettably, it isn't as much as you might learn in the great Kaldorei city of Darnassus, or the sacred Druid sanctuary of Moonglade in Kalimdor, but if she permits, all I can I offer to you."

"Who is this Ysera? Is she a goddess?" Link asked, thinking back to the three goddesses who created and shaped his own world, and one in particular.

"She is one of the great dragons charged with protecting this world by the ancient gods who shaped it." Oliver replied, his tone of voice reverent even as he said it.

"And she dwells up ahead?" Link asked.

"Not exactly, but you will see what I mean shortly." He replied again.

The path wound higher up through a narrow crevice in the rock that the horses would barely fit through and the two had to dismount and lead their broken down geldings through on foot. The sun had somehow risen high in the sky by the time the whole scene in front of Link began to change, and the scent of the forest became stronger and stronger. Soon, they came to an ornate archway carved in a style that Link hadn't yet encountered in this land, and once they passed through it was as though the curse upon the land of Duskwood had been halted and thrown back on itself.

As the path began to lead downwards once again, Link's eyes, ears and nose were treated to the sights and sounds of nature come alive as the path lead into a bowl shaped grove of trees, and grass, and just "life" and living things all around. It seemed to glow with a life and a peace all its own.

"What is this place?" Link asked. It felt so familiar, like coming home to the house he had grown up in.

"It is one of the groves in this world sacred to my order." Oliver replied. "We call this one, the Twilight Grove, and it is one of the few places in Azeroth where one might find a portal connecting this world with the Emerald Dream, Ysera's realm."

At the far end of the grove Link could see the only artificial structure which seemed to be standing. It looked made of stone, or otherwise some other kind of material for which he had no name. It was a great ring standing upright on a pedestal with a stone ramp leading up to it. Tendrils of the great tree which stood behind it wrapped themselves around the ring but did not cover it completely. Across the face of the ring were carved strange glowing symbols that meant nothing to the Hylian, though they seemed familiar in some way. The center of the ring seemed a "puddle" of greenish energy whose surface continuously moved back and forth.

Upon their entry deeper into the grove, and the closer they came to

the ring, a shadow seemed to pass over Link as though it were appraising him. The Hylian felt something probing him, his mind and heart way down into his very soul untilâ€

The triangular mark on the back of his left hand lit up and shone through the leather gauntlet. Perhaps it was intuition, or instinct, but Link brought his hand up into a fist, displaying the back of his hand and the mark of the Courage he carried to the unseen presence. The shadow paused as though considering this, and then it disappeared, apparently satisfied.

"What was that?" Link asked.

"The memory of the guardian of the grove." Oliver answered cryptically, though his voice betrayed no surprise at the outcome of the guardian's apparent challenge. "Only those it finds worthy may pass."

Another memory flashed through Link's mind, one of another guardian in another sacred grove far away in the Faron Woods. That guardian had not nearly been so easy to appease.

As Link and Oliver came to stand at the base of the stone ramp which led up to the ring, the Hylian observed the scene in front of him and something seemed off. It felt like something was missing.

"I feel as though I've been here before." Link told him. "But it feels as though something is missing."

Oliver took note of it, but said nothing.

"So, now what do I do?" Link asked.

"Ysera awaits." Oliver said, and then bowed his head, gesturing for Link to ascend the ramp.

Link looked at the Gilnean, and then nodded his understanding. This was something the Druid could not do for him. And then he fixed his eyes on the green energy of the ring and ascended the ramp. When he reached the platform at the top, he approached the swirling puddle and stopped inches from it, surveying it.

Then, he took his left hand and raised his fingertips towards the energy and touched it. It felt warm, like a bright summer's day. It felt alive as it danced playfully under his fingertips. But more than this, it felt familiar, maternal even, and welcoming.

He stepped into the energy, immersing his whole body in it.

Immediately, he felt the currents take him and he felt transported though somehow he knew his body remained where it stood.

He felt warm and secure. All around him was the scent and smell of the wild forest. In his being he heard or felt a beating. Calm, relaxed, and soothing. It was a great heart beat, though it was not his own. And somehow, a memory awakened within him of another heart with whose his own had beaten as one long, long ago.

"Mother?" He asked timidly, not knowing really how or why, but

somehow the truth of it surrounded him.

A warm glow infused him with a mother's love in response. In his heart he felt more than heard a voice, caring and sweet, "My child..."

"How?" He asked.

"I am known by many names, among many worlds," came the response, "and I am glad you have returned to me."

"Ysera?" Link asked.

"Here... for now among these people." The maternal presence seemed amused. "My incarnation in this world sleeps and dreams, battling against the nightmare that threatens this world's most sacred of realmsâ€| my sacred realm."

Feelings and emotions rose within the Hylian that he couldn't explain. Feelings of sadness and joy, hope and betrayal all at the same time even as the warm energy around him sought to comfort him as only a mother might.

"My chosen hero..." The presence continued. "This world has been thrown out of balance by reckless men who craved power above all else, and even now a great demon lord seeks to enter it and see all that has grown and lived and thrived here burn under the fires of his legions. This cannot be allowed to happen."

It was something he understood all too well.

"What would you have me do?" He asked.

"Receive the blessing of my power, my son." She said as a surge of new energy rushed through his being and suddenly flashes of running free through the forest undergrowth, soaring high over the treetops, and stalking prey deep in the undergrowth all flooded his very soul and overwhelmed him.

"Be my chosen hero in this land as well as in your own. Find your princess of wisdom once more, and use the golden flame to drive back the darkness and heal this world." The presence grew passionate in her appeal.

Link then remembered his "infection". "Oliver, the Druid who brought me to you, said that I will transform into a monster soon, a worgen like him."

A soothing feeling flowed through him. "The strength of the bear, the speed and stealth of the cat, the wings of the raptor, and yes the nobility and cunning of the wolf and worg; all of these are aspects of the responsibility I was charged with. Don't fight these my son, use their natural gifts and they will serve you well in your quest. Now go dear one, with my blessingâ€| and my love."

And then Link found himself standing once more, inches from the face of the great ring. He felt a wetness on his cheeks and brought his fingertips up to inspect them, though he could already smell the saltiness from the tears.

"Goodbye, mother." He said in a whisper.

"Ashenvale is no place for tourists." The orc lieutenant grunted towards the two women. "Even for a warrior as honored as Shaggara. This is still a contested region and a war zone, no matter how much progress against the night elves we may have made."

Shaggara nodded at his attempt at respect, though her frustration became apparent on her face.

They had hired wind riders to take them north from the crossroads to the Horde outpost known as Splintertree Post, which was the main hub of all traffic for the Horde through Ashenvale. The fort stood in the north of the province, standing roughly in between where east met west and served as the primary military garrison for the region.

Most of the post had been dug into the stone face of a hillside. The garrison "burrow" as the orcs called it ran in a tunnel deep within the rock. But nearby stood a few small but sturdy buildings, built in the orc fashion, which served as an inn and a few small trade shops.

Upon arrival, they continued in their inquiries regarding Shaggara's friend reasoning that if he had flown into Ashenvale on a hired wind rider, he would have had to have stopped here. Upon learning that a Forsaken mage had in fact arrived in Ashenvale and then proceeded to head east, they sought to hire or purchase riding worgs to follow.

It wasn't long before an orc soldier stepped in to try and dissuade them of that idea.

"We mean to cause no trouble." Zelda told him. "We are only looking to find a friend that passed through to the east."

"And that might be suicide, Blood Elf." The orc retorted as he eyed both women appraisingly. "We have demons constantly making raids on us. There is a satyr encampment dead along the road east. And, there are Night Elf rangers and sentinels, whom you don't get to see until they've got an arrow in your gut, patrolling all the roads from here to Azshara just looking to spill orc blood." He said when his eyes were on Shaggara, and then turning to Zelda he added, "I needn't remind you of their particular dislike for your kind either, I hope."

"Why?" Zelda asked innocently.

The orc soldier gave her a skeptical look with his eyes which seemed to say, "seriously?"

"We are more than capable of protecting ourselves, grunt." Shaggara growled, and it wasn't difficult to read the insult in her face which she had taken. "Or would you care for a demonstration?"

The orc stiffened at the challenge and Zelda could see the anger rising within him, but then it died down as Shaggara took a step towards him, a low growl emanating from her throat, one clawed hand on the axe she carried at her side. Then he snorted and took a step back from her.

"Whatever." He finally said. "It's your funeral pyre. The stable master is over there." He said gesturing down the road from the building which served as an inn. "Though I wouldn't count on him having any worgs to spare." He then moved off, leaving the two women on their own.

"Come, let us see what is available." Shaggara said as she began down the road.

Zelda followed after her. "The soldier seemed to know you." She said.

"Yes." Shaggara responded. "Shaggara has been many places, fought many battles. Shaggara is no stranger to Ashenvale, or its problems. The lieutenant was right. This is no place for tourists. There is heavy fighting still here."

"What are your people fighting with the Night Elves over?" Zelda asked.

"Wood. Resources to build our homes and feed our families. You saw the barren land we now call home. The earth there is nearly dead, and little will grow. If we are to survive, we must have supplies. The Night Elves refused to trade with us, even when we tried to negotiate and offer fair compensation." Shaggara told her, a certain bitterness creeping into her voice.

"So your people just took it?" Zelda asked.

"What else would you have us do? What else can we do when our people are homeless and our children have no food to eat? Do we watch them die of hunger? Should we listen to their cries while the Night Elves close their borders without mercy and watch from a distance? That is not the orc way." Shaggara said without shame. A fierce pride crept into her voice instead. "We are warriors, princess. We will take peace first when we can, but if we must fight in order to survive, we will." She then added, "What would you do if your child was starving, and your neighbor had a storage bin full of food, and no matter what price you offered, no matter what reason or kindness you showed, they would not share it? Would you let your child starve to leave your neighbor inviolate?"

The princess had no ready answer for her, her own mind and heart at war with the strong sense of right and wrong that felt so offended and confused by the prospect. What would she do? Then she thought of another ruler from long, long ago. A powerful king from a desert people who had also seen things in a similar way. Certainly he was wrong, wasn't he? But then could she let her own people go without so easily?

Shaggara let the matter drop as they reached the stable master. He was a short, green goblin dressed in a white dress shirt and a gray woolen waistcoat with matching trousers. His polished leather boots completed the look of a businessman. He had beady little eyes and a wary look about him as the two women approached him.

The stable itself was really just a series of posts which had been hammered into the ground with a hide shelter stretched over poles covering it. Few animals remained as the two surveyed their

choices.

"Can I help you fine ladies today?" The goblin asked in a smooth voice. His jet black hair had been slicked back and styled in a way which Zelda hoped his own people found flattering.

"We are looking to hire or purchase mounts. We need to ride east." Shaggara told him.

"Very dangerous!" The goblin responded quickly. "Very dangerous indeed! And if I had the worgs I had yesterday, I would have given them to you at half price, but sadly they went to the war effort." The goblin truly looked disappointed at this thought. "But!" He then said, talking fast and pointing with an index finger, "I do happen to have something a little more exotic. A pair of animals all the way from the human kingdoms far to the east! They're called 'horses'! And they're built for speed! The kind of speed you may need if you want to go east and outrun Alliance forces, yes?" He said, looking hopefully back and forth between the two women.

"Horses?" Zelda asked, an image of her own beloved Starfire running through her mind. "Show me." She said.

"Why yes ma'am! Right over here!" The goblin said excitedly, a certain gleem in his eye.

The salesman led them towards the back of the pen where two palamino horses were tied up and munching on some grasses and apples which had been haphazardly dropped in front of them. They both wore saddles which carried crests and sigils which were unfamiliar to Zelda, but appeared to mean something to Shaggara.

"These saddles are from Theramore, Jaina Proudmoore's lands." Shaggara observed with growing distaste for the goblin. "She has always been fair and honorable to us."

"Are they? I had no idea." The goblin replied innocently.

"And there are fresh blood stains across them." The orc woman said upon further inspection, her voice deepening into a growl.

"Well, they were used you know. I just got them in this morning. A certain troll warrior brought them in and traded them to me." The goblin said, a charming smile plastered all over his face.

"They're beautiful." Zelda said as she approached one animal to inspect it herself, and she meant it. She knew about horses having ridden from the time she was very young. Whomever was the previous owner, they obviously took good care of them. They were good, healthy specimens of what a riding animal should be. Turning to Shaggara she said, "They're in good condition."

Shaggara then looked down at the grinning salesman and asked the question he'd been waiting to hear, "How much?"

"Oh, well, for you ladies, I guess I could part with them, for sayâ€œ eighty gold? That's fair for such fine animals, wouldn't you say?" The goblin replied.

"Two gold." Shaggara responded.

The goblin laughed at her. "You must be joking dear lady, but I can see your friend really appreciates a fine quality animal when she sees one. So, let's say seventy gold?"

"Four." Shaggara responded.

The goblin's smile faded and was replaced with something decidedly less friendly, but still willing to do business. His hands began gesturing wildly, his eyes and expression steely as he began to haggle back and forth with the orc woman for some time.

Half an hour later, Shaggara and Zelda found themselves riding away from SplinterTree Post at a fast trot. This time it was Shaggara who appeared to be somewhat awkward riding an unfamiliar animal, though she took to it quickly. In the end, her coin purse became ten gold pieces lighter, though she seemed satisfied even as the goblin cursed and spat.

The road east curved north for some distance before turning back eastwards. Zelda felt more relaxed, and more herself than she had for some time as she rode comfortably in the saddle. It brought back good memories to her.

"My people have their own outriders that patrol this road for some distance. We shouldn't meet any Alliance forces for some time." Shaggara told her. "If Shaggara is right, the ruins we seek are not far up the road. Maybe a couple of hours of riding these animals. There is a Night Elf dig site at an ancient city or town called Forest Song. We will have to be very careful, but Shaggara thinks we can slip in unnoticed, especially while the sun is still high in the sky. Night Elves sleep during the day. If Gereth has been there, we will find out."

The next two hours were spent focusing on the road ahead. Ashenvale felt beautiful and untamed to Zelda. There was a peace about the forest around here, but also a sadness she felt, and an unease. The forests of Ashenvale seemed to have a personality that was watching her, judging her as though it didn't know what to do with the stranger that rode with one of the green skinned warrior intruders.

They passed armed orcs on the back of riding worgs several times as the Horde soldiers patrolled the eastern roads of the province which they controlled. Zelda felt red eyes on her more than once as the soldiers passed by them, though they did nothing to impede the women.

Shaggara must have noticed, because she dropped back to ride next to Zelda and said, "Pay them no mind. Many of the warriors here have lost friends to Night Elf blades and arrows. Your appearance reminds them of this, whether you are Night Elf or not. There was also a time when your people were allied with the humans against us during the second war. Trust is a difficult thing to come by between former enemies."

"Your world is truly complicated, Shaggara." Zelda replied, trying to wrap her mind around all of the complex interactions between the disparate races.

"Indeed." The orc woman responded. "It is said, in the ancient past, that the Kaldorei and the Sindorei were one people, and it was after a great cataclysm that destroyed most of this world's land and created the great sea and the maelstrom that they separated. One to follow nature, the stars, and the night, and one to follow arcane magic, the sun, and the day. Shaggara has seen great people from both, and great cowards. The same with humans and orcs. The balance of courage, wisdom, and power knows no race or caste."

"What did you say?" Zelda turned her head and looked at her in surprise.

"The balance of courage, wisdom, and power knows no race or caste." Shaggara repeated for her. "Is this such a strange concept for you? Shaggara had thought better of you, princess."

"No, it's not that it's just...." Zelda never got to finish her sentence as an arrow whizzed by her head, followed by another just over the surface of her shoulder.

"Sentinels!" Shaggara announced. "Ride, Zelda!" The orc kicked at her horse and Zelda followed suit, not needing to be told twice. The animals launched themselves into a full gallop on the road away from their unseen attackers and Zelda and Shaggara held on, bent over their pommels, streamlining themselves as though they were jockeys trying to win a trophy.

But then Zelda found herself disoriented as the ground beneath seemed to trade places with the sky above and she found herself flying through the air backwards. As the ground rushed up to meet her, something inside her awakened and she pulled her knees into herself and hit the ground in a roll before she launched herself back to her feet and took in the scene around her as though by instinct. The combat lessons of a tall, shadowy instructor with silver white hair rushed through her mind and muscle memory. The triangle mark on her right hand flashed with a golden light.

Her eyes sharpened and she saw the movement among the trees of violet skinned archers with long, sharp ears like her own and bright neon green and blue hair. She scanned the road and found her palamino on it's back on the ground unmoving. Shaggara lay not far from Zelda, though she did not hit the ground with as much skill as Zelda had found within herself and was struggling to bring herself to her feet.

Zelda's sharp ears heard another arrow knocked. She leaped towards her friend, threw up her hands, palms outward protectively and cried out the name of a goddess of her world, "Nayru!"

Instantly the air around her and her friend coalesced and hardened into a transparent, yet adamantine shield. The next thing she heard and saw were dark arrows with sharp metal tips smashing themselves on its surface.

Somehow, she knew the blessing of her patron goddess would only hold for about a minute or so before it faded again. She turned her attention to their attackers in the woods. She was able to count three of them that she could discern. All of them held resolute determination in their eyes as they knocked more arrows. They seemed to know the shield wouldn't hold forever as well, and they could be

patient.

"Zelda, what?" Shaggara asked groggily, but the princess could not answer her just yet. She searched deep within herself and found a power that she hadn't realized before. She stretched out her hands as though holding a bow, and suddenly an elegant golden bow with a quiver of arrows seemingly made of pure light appeared in her hands, and she found she knew how to use them quite well and to lethal effect.

She knocked one of these arrows of light, and drew back the bow. The weight of its bowstring seemed to have been made just for her as she pulled it taut with ease. Though, in her heart, she would not aim to kill and she knew it.

Suddenly those Night Elf sentinels hidden among the trees found themselves under attack by streaks of light that found their marks nailing hands to bows and the trunks of trees. More arrows flew smashing those weapons and the quivers which held their ammunition which had been used against the riders which had been felled on the road, and the sentinels then realized the danger they themselves were now in. Who was this light skinned Blood Elf who wielded such command over the Light?

"Out of respect for your cause and your forest, I am sparing your lives!" Zelda called out. "I understand you are just protecting your home! But we are only passing through as peaceful travelers seeking a friend! We mean no harm to this land! Leave us in peace, and we will respect you as well!"

There was silence except for the sound of moans of pain coming from the trees. And then, after several minutes, Zelda heard the tell tale sounds of rustling through the bushes indicating that the sentinels were moving off.

When the danger had passed, Zelda then turned her attention to her friend who sat on the ground staring at her with a hardened though curious expression. Then the orc's face softened, and she remarked, "There is more to you than meets the eye Shaggara thinks, Princess Zelda. Much, much more."

"I don't know..." Zelda struggled to explain. The truth was she had little idea as to what just happened, or what the feelings of memories which had been awakened within her meant or where they came from. "I've never done that before." She finally managed to say. "Any of it."

Zelda looked at the back of her right hand, knowing what the mark meant and what her own mother had told her about its power. The faint outline of a golden light seemed to burn and dance across the skin.

"Come, help Shaggara to her feet." Shaggara said, reaching out a hand to Zelda who helped pull the orc woman to a standing position. "We walk from here, Shaggara thinks." The warrior said, gesturing to the dead animals which now lay sprawled and unmoving on the road. "Unless you are able to raise the dead as well."

The thought would have been ridiculous only moments before, but now Zelda herself wondered in all seriousness. "Not that I know of," she

replied lightly.

"Come, princess. We have come most of the way. It is not far up the road now, and Shaggara is in one piece. She has survived much, much worse." The orc woman said. "Let us find our mage."

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7

It was mid-afternoon when Shaggara and Zelda saw the great Kaldorei arch which marked the ruins of the town known as Forest Song. Dark azure banners with Night Elf sigils hung from it, proclaiming their undisputed claim over the fallen structures and buckled, overgrown avenues. Set deeper into the forest, ironically it was still not far off the main road, but rather close as though it were still a functioning community and destination for weary travelers.

"The last Shaggara was here was many years ago," the orc woman told Zelda. "And then, there were only a handful of academics and Kaldorei who were here researching this place. For all Shaggara knows, they might have been the original townsfolk coming home to try and rebuild."

"The ruins can't be very old then, can they?" Zelda asked, confused.

"Night Elves rarely die of natural causes. Shaggara has heard that it is their connection to their moonwells and to the natural world that gives them a near immortality. Those sentinels that attacked us may easily be thousands of years old." Her companion replied.

Zelda tried to comprehend the breadth and scope of such a long life. What would it be like? Strangely, deep within her being she knew the answer, and not from simple insight. She didn't know how she knew, but somewhere with her she could feel joys and sadnesses, great loves and losses multiplied by hundreds and even thousands of lifetimes.

"Are you well, princess?" Shaggara's voice broke through her internal contemplation.

Freed for a moment, Zelda looked into the sincere, savagely beautiful face of her warrior friend and saw deep concern. She smiled, trying to recover herself, and said, "Yes. I was just trying to imagine such a long life, that's all."

"Mmm.." Was Shaggara's response, though the look of concern did not leave her expression.

As the two women wandered through the archway, suddenly Shaggara pulled Zelda to the side and behind some lush brush and undergrowth, her hand over her mouth. When they were both down on the ground, Shaggara pulled her hand away and pointed, showing Zelda what she had seen and heard.

Beyond their vantage point were the stone ruins of a once large outpost or town surrounded by dense, thriving forest. On the western side there still stood a great tall tower with a stone bridge or

rampway leading up to its entrance. Scattered across the site were several crumbling and ruined stone buildings which Zelda guessed were houses, shops, a temple perhaps by the architecture, as well as scattered blocks of stone and fallen columns.

Curiously, none of the stone had been overgrown with foliage. After this long, one would have expected the forest to reclaim its own. But it seemed to be held back. And then Zelda saw what Shaggara had seen and quickly sought a hiding spot for both of them. There, among the ruins were dozens of azure and violet skinned humanoids. As Zelda paid more attention, she noticed several large tents set up among the ruins as though a major excavation was in progress.

A few of these were like the Night Elves that Zelda had glimpsed through the brush. Most of them however were different from the elves. They had hooves for feet, and long tails. Bony protrusions sprouted from their otherwise dark haired heads. Most were walking around with papers and books like many other academics Zelda had met in her life, but some were well armed and seemed to be watching over their more studious companions.

As they watched, Zelda felt a tingling, and then a burning sensation coming from her right hand as though it had become electrified. She instinctively scratched lightly at it, though did not look.

"I thought you said there were only a handful of Night Elves, and they would be asleep during the day?" Zelda whispered to her friend.

"That was almost twenty years ago," Shaggara replied quietly. "Obviously, something has made this site of some importance to Alliance scholars since then."

The sensation from her hand continued, and Zelda scratched more at it.

"I haven't seen that race before. Who are they?" Zelda asked.

"They call themselves the Draenei, though they come from the same world Shaggara's people did. There was a time, in the time of Shaggara's mother's mother's mother, that they and orcs were at peace and even friendly with one another, but no more." Shaggara answered.

"Ah!" Zelda winced. The burning sensation increased and Zelda finally pulled her hand towards her face to see what was causing the issue. She turned it to inspect the back of her slender, feminine hand. As she did, the irritation began to ease, but the electrified sensation would not cease.

The triangle mark on her hand was glowing, outlining the three golden triangles that comprised it. One triangle in the bottom corner had distinguished itself as a solid piece of golden light. The Triforce of Wisdom, Zelda thought to herself. But why is it revealing itself? She didn't know, but as she paid attention to it, she felt drawn towards the ruined tower which still stood.

"What is wrong?" Shaggara whispered.

Zelda showed her, being careful to keep the mark from being seen

outside the brush.

"What does that mean?" The orc asked.

"It's only happened before when it comes close to one of its sister pieces, or when its powers are being drawn on." Zelda replied.

"Like back on the road." Shaggara observed.

Zelda nodded.

"So what does it mean now?" Shaggara asked. "Is something happening with you again?"

"I don't think so. I think it's trying to get my attention; something about the tower there." Zelda pointed with her left hand towards the mostly intact structure. It seemed, for the moment, to be ignored by most of the site's denizens as they focused on other, apparently more interesting places to dig and study.

Shaggara considered this new information silently. She then went back to observing the Alliance people there.

As they watched the various researchers and guards go about their business, it became clear that there was no way they were going to be able to search the ruins themselves. It also became clear that if Gereth had been here, he was now gone.

"Is it possible he could be working with the researchers?" Zelda asked.

Shaggara snorted. "No. Neither Night Elves nor the Draenei would ever consent to working with those like Gereth, regardless of the pursuit. Had they been aware of his presence, they would have tried to destroy him."

What is it about Gereth's people that so disturbs even their allies? Zelda wondered to herself. Shaggara still had not gone into details about the answer to that question.

Shaggara began looking around them, in particular through the brush. "Come, there is one other place near here, deep in the forest, where he might still be if he has not yet moved on. One that might have been of interest to him."

The orc woman quietly pointed towards a narrow forest path flattened smooth by the animals that used it to traverse the Ashenvale forest undergrowth. It wound its way north and east through the woods from their position.

Both she and Zelda quietly arose from where they had been squatting low and headed down the forest path.

When they were some distance out of sight of the ruins and their occupants, Shaggara, "There is a clearing Shaggara was once told of by a Tauren friend. There is a great relic there, Shaggara was told. It is held sacred to the Druids. It lies in this direction. It is possibly as old or older than the ruins of Forest Song itself. He may have gone there."

They slipped through the brush as silently as possible, hoping their movements would be taken as deer, wolves, or some other of the forest's native inhabitants. After over half an hour of trekking, however, they neither saw nor heard anyone in pursuit. Though after the road incident, Shaggara was no longer as concerned if they had. She might appear pampered and soft in her appearance, but there was so much more to this otherworldly princess that she did not even seem to know herself, and was only now discovering.

The trees ahead of them began to thin out, and Shaggara and Zelda saw the beginnings of a clearing where sunlight seemed to happily cut through the forest and enliven the grass and green growing things there.

And then they saw the clearing's inhabitants, and once more they had to take cover lest they might be seen. The huge centaur like warriors were well armored from head to toe. Instead of a horse's body and a human torso, as one might expect, these carried the lower body of a green dragon, and the upper, incredibly muscular torso just barely resembled something humanoid. Their weapons were massive, and they seemed to be under constant patrol.

"Green Dragonkin." Shaggara pronounced. "Very, very dangerous. They appear to be guarding the clearing."

"Whose faction are they with? Alliance or Horde?" Zelda asked.

"They are with no one's faction, princess. Shaggara has heard many tales told of the dragonkin, where they come from, and what their purpose is. These are green dragonkin. It is reasonable to assume that they are watchers for Ysera, the patron of the Druids." Shaggara said.

"Ysera? Is she a goddess of this world?" Zelda asked.

"I have heard many contradictory things on that point," Shaggara said. "But with all the reverence paid her by the Druids, she might as well be. According to most, she is one of the great elemental dragons tasked with guarding and preserving this world by the Titans, the deities who supposedly created this world."

No. Not created, merely shaped. The thought flew through Zelda's mind so quickly it barely had time to process.

"What elemental force does she guard?" Zelda asked, ignoring the rogue thought.

Nature, the forest, and all living things as you well know. Her subconscious mind threw the answer at her before she could consciously process it.

"Nature. This is why the Druids so revere her." Shaggara replied.

The guardians will recognize me. They will acquiesce to me and mine. This thought came through clear and strong, and from where Zelda didn't know. But she felt the truth of it deeply, so deeply it frightened her.

It was then that she noticed the burning sensation emanating from her

right hand again. As she looked at it, she saw that the mark on her hand had been outlined with a fierce golden light as the strange line of thought persisted.

"It glows again." Shaggara noticed. "What is it, now?"

It made little rational sense to her, but Zelda knew what she had to do, and it didn't involve hiding in the bushes. More and more the urge, the instinct within her began to take over much as on the road. Her sight and her hearing became much clearer. She felt an energy course through her, a power that she still didn't understand but it felt not just a part of her, but integral to her very being.

Without an answer to the orc, she stood up from where they had been squatting and strode confidently out from the shadows of the trees, her bearing regal and nearly glowing with authority.

Shaggara did not try and stop her, but watched the scene silently. She fully believed that Zelda herself did not understand what was happening with her. But whatever was happening with the Hylian had something to do with the glowing triangles she called the Triforce in her "legend", and in particular the one which seemed imbedded in her right hand. There were forces at work with the elven princess that Shaggara had learned long ago to not put to the test too much, else she might find herself on the receiving end as many of her comrades had over the years. They tried to fight the whirlwind with their strength and cunning alone, and found themselves shattered by it. Shaggara knew her own limits. She had tested them again and again. The power of the triangles was beyond her.

Zelda came to stand out in the open. Her head erect, her posture queenly and dominant. Then she caught the attention of a nearby dragonkin, and Shaggara waited to see the outcome, her breathing slow and deliberate.

The dragonkin raised it's weapon and approached the intruder threateningly as though it would impale the fragile looking princess on its blade and be done with it. Then Zelda calmly held up the back of her right hand for the creature to see as it drew closer.

The drakonkin stopped dead in its tracks. Its clawed feet seemed to dig into the earth pensively, as though it wasn't certain as to how to respond. Clearly, it had been caught off guard.

Shaggara rose from her own position and crept closer, cat-like and stealthy so as not to attract the wrong kind of attention to herself. As she did, she got a better look at the dragon-kin's face. It looked like a confused child, not sure of which parent to obey.

Finally, the dragonkin lowered its weapon, letting the tip sink to the ground. Then she saw something she would never have expected, though somehow it didn't seem that surprising. The fearsome warrior creature dropped it's forelegs to its knees, and bowed deeply, touching its chest with the fist of its free hand. She heard a deep, rumbling voice, one which reminded her of the creature's monstrous and powerful ancestry, utter with fear and respect, "My Lady, how may I serve you?"

Who is Zelda? What is she? Shaggara wondered with amazement. In her

lifetime she had seen dragons or dragonkin bow to no one, no matter how powerful or fearsome. Ever.

"I seek a Forsaken mage who may have passed through here." Zelda told the warrior, her voice dripping with authority and unquestionable power and wisdom.

The dragonkin warrior did not raise his head, but answered, "There was one such as you describe, My Lady. He attempted to seek the portal to the Emerald Dream. His corpse lies there."

The creature gestured off to his right. Zelda's head turned in the direction, and without turning it back, she asked, "So he is dead?"

"He was never alive, My Lady. But he has since stopped moving." The dragonkin responded.

Zelda turned back to look at the dragonkin. She told him, "Another warrior has come with me. One of the orcs. She is under my protection. You will serve her as you serve me. Do you understand?"

Without missing a beat, the dragonkin warrior responded, "As you wish, My Lady."

Zelda then called out, "Shaggara, you may come out of the trees now. The guardian will do you no harm."

Shaggara stepped forth from the shadows of the trees, and approached her friend, coming to stand next to the much changed young elf woman, though she remained silent at the scene. In truth, there was nothing she could say to express all the emotions that ran through her heart and mind.

"Come. Let us see to our friend." Zelda said, turning to go in the direction the dragonkin warrior indicated. She motioned for Shaggara to follow. When the guardian remained where he was, without turning around, Zelda called out, "Come!" And the warrior rose from his knees and followed behind both subserviently, and protectively.

After a few minutes walk through the clearing, they came upon what appeared to be a partially decayed human corpse wrapped in a dark red robe lying on its stomach. Bits of bone could be seen, and the flesh had long ago turned a sickly green color. The hair as well, once perhaps blond, was a sickly, decayed greenish yellow.

Shaggara bent down over the corpse, and rolled it over onto its back. It was stiff and somewhat unyielding as she did so, but she was able to uncover the poor man's decayed face, which, surprisingly, seemed mostly intact. A fine layer of beard stubble decorated his cheeks and chin. Zelda could tell at one time he had been a strikingly handsome man before his death. His eyeballs, open and exposed were glazed over white.

Then Shaggara did a strange thing to Zelda, she began to rifle through his robes as though looking for something.

"What are you looking for?" Zelda asked, her voice somewhat returning to normal.

"A potion he keeps on himself for situations like this." Shaggara responded.

"Shaggara," Zelda tried to say as compassionately and comforting as she could, "He's been dead for a long time. There's little left to do but commit his soul to the goddesses."

"Ah!" Shaggara gave a little shout of triumph. She pulled out from beneath his robes a small black vial which she uncorked. She then dribbled a few drops of its contents onto the dead and deteriorating lips.

"Shaggara..." Zelda began again. The man must have meant something special to the orc woman for her to be in such denial about his condition, Zelda was certain.

Shaggara smirked strangely, and then said, "Perhaps one day we will, but it is not this day."

Then the corpse's eyes began to blink. From within it's rotting mouth, a tongue began to move and lick the decaying lips to moisten them. Then its whole body began to shift and move and much to Zelda's horror, the corpse sat up. It looked back and forth between the two women, blinking its eyes as though it had just had a good nap.

"Shaggara?" A younger man's voice came from the corpse's mouth. "What are you doing here? It's not safe."

"Shaggara would ask you the same, my friend." Shaggara responded. "The Kaldorei do not respond well to the presence of the Forsaken."

"Unfortunately, few do. So it is our lot in lifeâ€| or death if you like." The corpse returned wistfully.

Zelda watched the surreal scene and felt at a total loss. What had happened and how was this possible?

"Gereth?" Zelda asked the corpse in disbelief.

"So my orcish friend has told you all about me, has she?" Gereth replied. Then seeing the look on her face, he said, "Or perhaps not everything. Shaggara my dear, did you perhaps leave out one important detail about me? Tsk. Tsk."

Shaggara smiled at him. "Not so important as some believe, my friend."

"Shaggara, what is happening?" Zelda asked, still trying to wrap her mind around the scene in front of her.

"I can see you're quite disturbed at myâ€| condition. Funny, I thought the Sindorei were quite amiable to my people." Gereth told her as he pulled a water skin from somewhere in his robes and began to drink.

"She is not Sindorei." Shaggara explained. "She does not understand what happened during the third war."

The living corpse turned his body to study Zelda more closely. His eyes, though clearly dead, still seemed quite intelligent and quick witted as he appraised his friend's new companion. He then nodded, saying, "Perhaps then that is a story worth telling, but not here and now. For now, my dear, suffice it to say that my people were victims of a plague. It killed all of us, myself included. Imagine my surprise when I woke up again. But that is a story for another time. Right now, I'm glad you are here. I am close, Shaggara. I am so close to finding it, the answer for me, and maybe my people. It's here, I know it's here."

"What is here?" Shaggara asked him as he reached out to her a bony hand covered in a dark red cloth glove. She took it and helped him to his feet.

The manâ€¢ corpse... was tall and broad shouldered as he stood up. His hair lay full and playful across his scalp. Echoes of his original, living presence appeared strongly, though twisted by the ravages of a plague that he could not control.

"The Golden Flame, my dear. I am convinced of it. I mean, it's not here where we are right now, but back there in Forest Song. I'm convinced that the tower holds the key to it." Gereth gestured back towards the archaeological site.

It was then that he saw the dragonkin warrior that had followed Zelda, and still appeared at her beck and call.

"Um..." He began. "Is there something you'd like to tell me now?"

"Much. But not here. Why did you come this close to the portal?" Shaggara asked.

"Because I thought maybe the key to unlocking the tower was here somewhere, but I found nothing. And then my invisibility potion wore off, and I didn't have any more. Imagine the dragonkin's surprise when they suddenly found one of 'me' wandering so close to their gateway. So, I did what my people do best. I played dead. I let one of them hit me, and then I took a little potion induced nap. I guess I took more than I thought." Gereth explained.

"We need to talk." Shaggara told him. "But not here. Somewhere safer."

"Of course. Now that I have seen this area, I should be able to open a portal back here without too much difficulty. I'm actually very good at portal magic, you know. I just don't always have the materials for it." He then brought out a small stone covered in runes from within his robe. "So, Shaggara, what will it be? Orgimmar? The Undercity, or Thunderbluff if you're feeling like something spiritual and rustic?" Then looking at Zelda he then said, "I know just the place to make our dear new friend feel welcome, Silvermoon! There's a very good inn there with some great food, or at least so I am told. My taste buds aren't what they used to be I'm afraid." The corpse gave a lopsided grin, which, in spite of herself, Zelda found quite charming.

Shaggara nodded. "That will be good." She then turned to Zelda and

said, "I don't know what magics or influence you used on the guardian, but he cannot follow us through the portal. It would be problematic."

Zelda still stood somewhat in shock over the whole situation, but she then snapped herself out of it and said, "Oh, yes."

Turning to the guardian, Zelda resumed her regal bearing and told the dragonkin, "I release you for the time being. Resume your duties here until my return."

The creature saluted her and bowed again saying, "My Lady, I await your return." Then he turned and resumed his patrol through the clearing, away from the three beings now standing there.

"You have got to teach me that trick." Gereth said in awe.

"I wish I knew myself." Zelda replied.

Gereth then gripped the stone tightly in his gloved hand and closed his milky white eyes. Chanting something in a language Zelda found familiar though unintelligible, he then stretched out his hand and the space in front of him seemed to warp and turn in on itself creating a distortion in the fabric of reality which resembled a bright blue puddle of brightly lit water.

"Silvermoon is waiting." Gereth then said, and with a flourished bow and polite gesture towards the distortion, he said, "Ladies first," inviting them to step through.

8. Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Ganondorfâ€| A voice called to him from the darkness of the twisting void he had been floating in, calling him back from it.

One eyelid managed to flutter open. A few minutes later, the other one joined it. The olive green skinned prisoner's eyes slowly came back into focus as his conscious mind and awareness became active once more. He felt the bindings on his wrists and ankles once more, and found that the nightmare he had been suddenly immersed in had not yet ended.

Awaken Gerudo kingâ€| The voice continued.

Pain. Pain streaked through his body once more, but it ran so much deeper than that. He fought back tears that were born of more than the physical pain. He refused to show weakness to this foul Hylian sorcerer that had managed to entrap him. But the sense of violation ran deep through him, as though something integral to him had been stripped away.

Your work is not yet doneâ€| The voice was soothing, almost paternal to him.

Powerless. He felt as powerless as though standing before a sandstorm that he knew would strip the flesh from his bones in seconds. He felt drained of all the energy and magic which he had held within him. He

had no strength to even prop up his head, but he was alive.

"Awake again, I see." The Hylian said, his voice neutral. "I can honestly say I'm rather pleased you survived the extraction process. To be honest, it required so much arcane energy to remove the relic, I thought it would rip your mortal body apart." He paused for a minute and then said, "You know, your race appears very orc-like, except for the tusks and the upper body size. I hadn't noticed it before. Perhaps there is a relationship worth studying."

The Hylian stood only a few feet in front of him, close enough for the prisoner to see his dark azure cloth robes and slippers, though not his face. He didn't have the strength to angle his head to see that. He saw nothing through his eyes which led him to believe he had been moved at all.

Duazhen. That was the Hylian's name, Ganondorf remembered. Then he thought, _What extraction process?_ But he was too weak to say anything. Instead, he just tried to locate the man with his eyes.

"I can see it took its toll on you, regardless. Well, no matter. I can restore some of your strength to you in time; enough to answer some of my questions about this relic anyway. I have no interest in either your death or your life after that. Perhaps I may even be able to send you back to where I drew you from, if you cooperate with my work." Duazhen told him.

The Hylian then held out a very familiar golden triangle in his gloved hand. It seemed to shift this way and that, and no matter which angle it was viewed from, it always appeared as a triangle as though its existence and form extended into other dimensions hidden from the mortal eye. It glowed a golden white with an internal energy and light.

"You must know how to use it, yes?" He asked.

The man waved it in front of Ganondorf's face tauntingly, but the former king of the Gerudos could do nothing but watch.

We could destroy him. The thought passed through the prisoner's mind, though while he agreed with it, it did not feel as though it originated with him. _How dare he take the Triforce of Power from you!_

"Yes," the sorcerer continued. "It isn't like any other magical relic I've ever studied, and to be honest, I was led to believe it would bend to my will with merely a wish. Since I found it fused to your soul, a reasonable conclusion is that you have the information I want."

You could be a channel for my power if you would lend yourself to me. Together, we could show this fool the true meaning of 'power'. The thought drifted through his mind, tantalizingly. But then his spirit rebelled against it.

"Iâ€| amâ€| noâ€| one'sâ€| slave..." His lips moved, mouthing the words though no sound came forth.

_Who said anything about being a slave? You and I are kindred spirits, Ganondorf the Great. We want only the power to do what

others will not. I am the power you seek, the voice in the darkness, the fire in your heart. With me you will see your enemies crushed before you. Yes, even that upstart boy that bested you. The voice spoke soothingly and cunningly to him.

"Whatâ€| what doâ€| you want?" Ganondorf mouthed.

Only to be yourâ€| partner. Together, our power will burn across this world and countless others. You only need to say the word. _

"Whyâ€| do youâ€| needâ€| me?" The Gerudos face and lips felt afire as he asked silently, almost imperceptibly.

Perhaps I don't, _came the response, perhaps I just chose you as a kindness. _

Ganondorf would have laughed had he the strength. He wouldn't play the fool for this voice. He wouldn't be anyone's fool. He gave no reply, his amusement and disdain alone his response.

He felt a flash of frustration rush through his mind, and then the voice became calm and soothing again. Perhaps I cannot manifest in my true form yet in this world. Surely you can appreciate my conundrum? _

More thoughts then began to flow through his mind; thoughts that fed on Ganondorf's sense of violation and building rage, and thoughts that could only be described as increasingly demonic in origin as they promised limitless power in exchange for his cooperation. Second after second, minute after minute, his mind and soul gave way to the sweet seduction and promises of power and vengeance.

The Gerudo king then began to tune out the Hylian's incessant babbling about his plans, something about remaking the world (blah, blah, blah), and began instead to listen to the voice in his mind with rapt attention.

Slowly, his eyes began to glow, a red flame rising within them.

"Arghhhh!" Link cried out in pain as his body began to contort in the glowing waters.

"Don't fight it, use it, boy!" Oliver told him, trying to guide him. "Feel the beast within and unleash him!"

The Druid had smelled the elven warrior's blood beginning to reach its critical point hours before. After as much instruction in ancient Druid rites as he could give him, he led Link to a small stone pool of water off to the east of the portal and tucked away, almost hidden out of site. Instantly he recognized it as a place of powerful magics, reminding him of other pools and fountains from his homeland, and the Great Fairies that guarded them.

"This is a moonwell." He had said. "It is a deeply spiritual place, a shrine, if you will, to the Kaldorei goddess of the moon, Elune. The moon is also a deeply important symbol to us worgen as well, Link. By bathing in its waters, we call upon the moon's blessing as well as Ysera's." Oliver told him. "We ask Elune to grant you and guide you

in this new life under the light of the moon."

The worgen Druid then insisted that Link strip down to his loin cloth, and step into the gently glowing, silver blue waters. As his first bare foot touched the water, he felt a rush of energy and strength welling up within him. He then continued, immersing the lower half of his body in the moonwell's sacred waters. Making his way to the middle of the pool, he turned to face his new found mentor and instructor.

"Feel the spirit of the worg within you!" The Gilnean instructed. "Feel its heart beating, tearing to come free. Smell the air around you for the scent of your prey. Feel the brotherhood of the pack, and the noble courage of the worg in defending it."

Pain! Shooting, burning pain raced through his spasming body. Link's body spasmed, and he cried out, "AHHHHH!".

Grey and white hair sprouted all over Link's body and his limbs contorted and elongated. His jaw and nose stretched and elongated, and he felt something growing out from his spine's tail bone. It was excruciating as it happened.

The golden triangle mark on his sword hand burned bright with a golden white light, and a single small triangle at the base lit up as a solid, and not a mere outline. Defensively, as though to keep a hold on its bearer, it forced another awakening within the Hylian, one from deep within his soul and subconscious; one which had lived and died a thousand times with a single goal in mind.

Finally, when he could stand it no more, he let out a great growl which became a howl which carried for miles around.

Then the pain suddenly ceased, and Link realized his eyes were closed tight. He opened them, nearly having to force them for fear of what they might tell him.

"Link?" A deep, raspy animalistic voice asked gently. "Are you still yourself?"

Am I? Link questioned to himself. A thousand selves he had been were coalescing into a single conscious mind with access, fully conscious access to memories spanning back nearly ten millennia.

He looked down at himself, but it wasn't his body. It was larger and more muscular. Grey and white fur with a dark brown and black trim covered him from head to toe. His fingers, now attached to powerful hands which seemed impossibly large terminated in sharp claws instead of fingernails. His lupine feet were no different. He could feel a strength and an agility that had never been his before. As he flexed his hands and arms, he felt the power in them. The scents and sounds of the previously quiet and serene grove assaulted his already acute senses.

"I don't know." Link responded, shakily, his own voice deep and growly.

"What is your name?" Oliver's worgen voice asked.

Link looked towards the man, and found him replaced with the same

worgen creature he had encountered back in the room in the Scarlet Raven. Though he also found that the world had gone many different shades of gray.

"My eyes! What happened to all the colors?" Link asked.

"I will tell you in time. What is your name, please?" Oliver repeated patiently.

The newborn worgen searched the memories of his many life times, and in every language and dialect, his name appeared as only a single meaning regardless of the evolutionary stage of the language.

"Link. My name is Link." The new worgen responded.

"And where are you from, Link?" Oliver asked.

"Hyrule. I am from Hyrule." Link answered again, though deep within himself, he knew there was a time before Hyrule as well, and a city on the sea, far, far away.

"Good. Good." Oliver responded. "And what is my name, my friend?"

"Oliver. Oliver Harris." Link told him. "I remember. I remember everything." He said. "I know who I am."

As memories, thoughts, and feelings came rushing into his mind, Link realized for the first time in his life, in this life, that he truly did know and understand who he was, where he had come from, and what his place was. In truth, in all of his incarnations there was only ever one purpose, and one person he fought to protect, from eternity past it seemed, ever only his one true love, and he would die a thousand times more to see her safe he knew.

"Good. Elune has been kind to you tonight, child of Ysera." Oliver said. "More often than not, a worgen loses himself upon transformation. Some never recover their original form. I prayed that this would not be your fate."

Link nodded his understanding. He then asked, gesturing to his new form, "Will I stay like this? Or will I be like you, and be able to change at will?"

"Ah, now there is the question. We will answer it together, you and I. And I think the nature dragon's blessing upon you will be the key to answering it. It will take great discipline and control, but I sense that you are more than capable on this count." Oliver told him.

As the Gilnean worgen looked into Link's newly lupine eyes, he noticed a change in them, a depth of knowledge and experience that hadn't been there before now. It felt as if he were in the presence ofâ€

No matter. He dismissed the thought. But I will observe this one closely. He thought to himself.

He then said out loud, "Come brother, I have much to teach you, and precious little time before we must make our way to Stormwind to

return you to your companions tomorrow. It would be best if that first meeting were done without fur and fangs."

They had stepped through the portal as easily as walking through a door. On one side had been the clearing where they had found Shaggara's corpse friend. On the other, they materialized in the middle of a pleasant, park like square with benches, trees and grassy areas for people to rest and relax.

Zelda found herself just slightly disoriented from the experience as she looked around herself to get her bearings. As she did, she realized that the scene around her now was vastly, vastly different from the rustic, battle oriented Orc capital, or the plains tribal Tauren outpost. Instead, there was a sense of ancient, classical aesthetic that was somewhat reminiscent of the fallen ruins of Forest Song, but "evolved" somehow.

Glowing orbs hung from tall flowing street lamps which followed the paths of white stone roads around the central square. On either side of the central square were elegant buildings and what looked like shop fronts in a bright and sunny kind of architecture. Stylish statues of tall elven heroes and important figures in gold and bronze were placed around the square in prominent, though not overt locations around the square. It was quiet and cool though not cold, and there were few people out walking the streets. Zelda then realized why.

Far from being the late afternoon, she noticed that stars above them filled a night sky, while a dim glow was forming off to the east. The familiar glow of an approaching dawn.

"Sorry, my bad," Gereth had said apologetically. "I forgot about the difference in time between Ashenvale and Eversong. I guess the old maggots in the brain ate a little too well while I was napping." He quipped at his own expense. He then asked sheepishly, "So, anyone up for breakfast?"

The undead mage gestured in the direction of a particular shop front which was set down a short flight of marble steps and into the row of buildings off to their left, opposite the growing glow in the east. Sumptuous azure curtains draped the front entry way.

"I give you the Silvermoon City Inn." He then said as he led the two women down the steps and into the entry corridor of the establishment.

The interior felt both luxurious and somewhat rustic. Gauzy, azure blue silk drapes hung across its entrances, and intricately designed high backed chairs stood around a large ornate table in its common eating area. This contrasted with the head of a boar which decorated one wall and the casks which had been stacked neatly under an elegant staircase with an ornately wrought golden railing.

Regardless of the extremely early hour, a lithe Sindorei woman came out from behind a bar to greet them. She had soft, beautiful light brown hair which hung to her shoulders, light skin, and wore a dress of green and purple that seemed both practical and exquisitely made. Even her leather sandals seemed finely made, as though for a princess. Her eyes seemed to glow with a greenish fire. Zelda felt a kind of longing for her own home when she saw her as she realized

this was the first actual "Blood Elf," as they were called, that she had met in this world, and the woman looked very, very Hylian even to her.

"Welcome to my humble establishment." She said politely. Then, as Gereth dropped the cowl of his robe which he had covered his head with, there was some mild surprise and pleasure in her expression as she said, "Ah, Gereth, you've returned to me sooner than I expected."

"Well, I heard so much about the food and wine the last time I was here, I had to bring someone with me who could taste it properly!" Gereth replied with a smile. "Sorry about the early hour, though, Velandra. We just popped in from..."

"Oh, that is no trouble at all!" Velandra replied. "I am always awake at this time before dawn. I like to greet the sun as it brings us into a new day."

Velandra invited Zelda, Shaggara, and Gereth to sit around the table, and it was soon covered in platters and dishes of food so artistically arranged that the Hylian princess had difficulty bringing herself to disturb them regardless of her hunger. Could she have done all this herself in that short an amount of time? The princess didn't think it was possible.

The centerpiece had been a small, traditionally roasted piglet with an apple stuffed in its mouth, and basted with a spiced and tangy sauce that Zelda couldn't quite identify. The smell of it lingered in the air making her mouth water intensely. Aside from this, there had been many different kinds of fresh fruit cut artistically into the shapes of birds and animals. There had also been a kind of spiced bread. A sharp Brie cheese ("smuggled from Stormwind in the south," or so she had been told) had been served as well with a sweet, blood red wine. Sadly, the innkeeper didn't seem to keep any of the Blackrock coffee Zelda had sampled in the Crossroads.

As they sat and ate, Zelda noticed a broom sweeping itself near the entrance, and being very particular about getting the edges and corners of the walls. As her eyes seemed to be drawn around the room, she noticed a writing quill on the bar dipping itself into an inkwell and then scribbling onto a slightly yellowed sheet of parchment. The air around her seemed charged with a kind of energy that she somehow knew, though she kept her observations to herself.

"So, was I right about the food?" Gereth asked the two women. "I hope that Paladin wasn't lying to me, or just talking up the food for the sake of elven pride." He said this as he himself took a bite of the spiced bread which he had spread with a thin layer of the Brie.

"Can't you taste it?" Zelda asked innocently.

"Only hints really." He replied with a trace of melancholy. "As I said, my taste buds just aren't what they used to be. Everything seems to taste of dust or mold now, no matter what it is. Sometimes, if a food has a strong enough taste to it, I can even somewhat enjoy it. Like that ale back in the hostel in the Crossroads. The ale master there brews it so strong that I can actually sip it and remember what it was like back in the tavern in Andorhal. Oddly

enough, the moldy taste actually adds to the flavor." He gave a chuckle. "It was wonderful."

"I'm sorry." Zelda said.

Gereth waived a hand dismissively. "Don't be. I've been like this for a long time now. Years, actually. You know, I was angry at first, like most of us."

"And you're not anymore?" Zelda asked.

Gereth leaned back in his chair, folding his bony, gloved hands together in his lap. His gaze was drawn down to them pensively.

"Perhaps we should discuss..." Shaggara began, giving Zelda a stern look.

"No, it's alright Shaggara. She meant no harm, and perhaps it will put my presence in Ashenvale, and my search for the relic into some perspective." Gereth said. "Besides, it's not a bad story, though I can't say much for the storyteller."

"Gereth..." Shaggara said, empathy filling her raspy orc voice.

Gereth held up his hand again. "Don't worry my dear, I'm fine."

"I've had to fill in the gaps over the years, you understand, as far as the backstory, in order to understand it myself." Gereth began. "I haven't put all the pieces into place, but I think I've got most of them. After the Scourge spread the plague..."

"What Scourge?" Zelda asked, her eyes betraying her ignorance.

Gereth's white eyes went wide.

"Gereth, Zelda's not from this world. She's not from any world Shaggara has heard of. She doesn't know anything about our history." Shaggara told him.

He then looked hard at her, studying her. "I see. Well, then I start a little farther back." He began again. "Many years ago, an army of demons ruled by a fallen immortal Titan called Sargeras attempted to invade our world. At the time, all of these lands both here in Eversong, and south of us in Lordaeron were thriving High Elven and Human civilizations. Great cities, including Silvermoon City here, Stromgarde, the ancient human capital, and the great city of Lordaeron to the southwest of us lived and thrived as well as many, many elven and human towns and villages. My town of Andorhal was one of them."

"One of their devices of war was a devilish plague which they used to poison their grain and water supplies. When they decided the time was right, they activated the plague and it killed almost everyone in these northern lands. Myself included."

"At the time, I had been just an apprentice mage. My master had told

me how well my studies were going. He was going to be sending me to Dalaran to study in the great libraries and laboratories there under the eyes of the Kirin Tor. My father had already passed away, but my mother and sister lived with me in our house in the town. She was a beautiful girl who had so many suitors trying to take her away from us..." He trailed off for a minute, lost in his own thoughts. But then his expression snapped back.

"All of a sudden, from seemingly nowhere, people began dying in town. and not just a few people either. One day they would be fine, and going about their business eating, drinking, laughing, livingâ€! And then the nextâ€! It was awful to watch. I watched my mother and sister be taken first. They had always held more delicate constitutions. The plague consumed them quickly. The symptoms began after breakfast, and then they were just gone by evening. The bodies of the plague victims began to pile so fast there was nowhere to put them. Then, one morning, I started retching up blood and doubling over. It wasn't long before I joined them. I actually remember my last thought before everything went dark. Do you know what it was? I thought, I hope I get to see my father again."

Gereth looked as though he might have wept at the memory, though no tears came forth down his decayed face.

"The next thing I remember was opening my eyes again. Do you know where I was? I was in a graveyard lying among countless other corpses. I was breathing. I was somehow alive. I thought, maybe I've beaten it somehow. Maybe I was in the graveyard by mistake. And then I looked at my hands."

Gereth took off the glove of his right hand and showed it to the young elven woman. Tattered and torn skin, green from decay covered most, but not all of the bone and tissues underneath. The tips of his fingers had almost completely rotted away and all that remained were the tips of off-white bone protruding.

Zelda felt her gorge rise as she saw it, and then quickly tried to force it back down. "Holy goddesses..." She whispered.

"Yes, that was similar to my reaction." Gereth said knowingly, replacing the glove and hiding the deformed and rotting appendage once more. "I didn't know what had happened or why, but somehow I was alive, and yet not. As I looked around me that night, I saw others like myself rising from where their bodies had been lain; many, many others, though not all of the dead that had been left there. I searched the graveyard for some time and finally found my mother and sister. They didn't wake up with me."

Zelda's expression turned from one of revulsion to empathy and compassion for the undead mage. She couldn't imagine the torment he had felt. Her eyes began to water as he spoke.

"But that wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was the voice in my head, commanding me, ordering me to obey. And I had to do it. I couldn't not obey. Like everyone else that woke up that night, I became a part of an army of undead and we were made to do horrible, horrible things to the remaining living across the face of this land. And then, afterâ€! what was it, months? Years of war? I don't even remember how long I was enthralled to the Scourge. After what seemed like an eternity, suddenly, I was free from the voice. I had my own

will, and my own thoughts again. Many of us did, and we learned that it was a banshee, a former High Elf who had somehow broken our chains to the Lich King and his demon masters. She became our new queen and we set about trying to rebuild our lives and our fallen kingdom under the ruins of the city of Lordaeron. It's what we now call the 'Undercity'. Imaginative lot for a bunch of walking corpses aren't we?"

Gereth smirked at his own attempt at humor, and Zelda felt the corners of her own mouth attempt to twinge and bend upwards.

"And then the living, those who survived the plague and those from the southern continent, attacked us. Our own people, former friends and family, set about to destroy every one of us calling us monsters and unholy as though somehow we did this to ourselves. Somewhere, some cleric decided we were no longer people. We were no longer human. You know, I had an uncle down in Stormwind before. He wasn't a mage, but he ran a tailor's shop. I tried to write to him once. I wanted him to know that I was somehow still alive. I never got a response back, at least not from him directly.

"I was angry for a long time. I felt betrayed and abandoned by everyone except those like me. I evenâ€| contributed my skills to the later plague that we unleashed on Hillsbrad and Southshore to finish the job the Scourge started and add the rest of the living there to our ranks. What better way to deal with a person who wants to destroy you than make him one of you?"

Gereth went silent as he let his memories overtake him. "We rounded up the living into camps and began to experiment on the men, the women, and... the children."

Zelda's hand went involuntarily to her mouth in horror. And then she asked in a hoarse whisper, "What changed?"

Gereth continued his story, "I watched the plague take a little girl. I unleashed it on her. She couldn't have been more than ten or eleven years old. I remember her clearly. She had beautiful blond hair, and blue eyes like my sister did. And I remember thinking about my sister, and I realized that I had become the same monster that killed my sister and my mother. The little girl never woke up either, and for that I'm actually glad. I might have cremated myself after that if she had. I left Hillsbrad and the 'harvesting' work after that. I went to Kalimdor and joined the greater Horde armies, and then to Outland to fight against the Burning Legion that had created the Scourge. That's where I met my dear Shaggara here, and then I actually made it to Northrend and finally Dalaran which had become a neutral, sanctuary city where I was able to finally continue pursuing my study of arcane magic under a Sindorei master named Duazhen. I was and remain grateful to him. He didn't care about who or what I was, only my skill and dedication to the mystic arts. And it was there, as I studied in his libraries that I ran across an old, travel stained journal of a human adventurer, a Paladin who had discovered the existence of the Golden Flame in Un'goro crater in Kalimdor. An honorable servant of the light, he wrote that he completed the task left to him by a gnome he met named 'Linken' who had been injured and had lost his memory somehow."

Zelda's ears perked up at the mention of the very similar name to her companion, though she said nothing and let him continue.

"According to the Paladin, the relic had powerful mystical properties, capable of bending reality to the will of the one who wielded it. He said it appeared as a golden, light filled triangle, no matter how you turned it, or from which angle you viewed it. Intrigued, I dug into my master's library further and found vague references to this Golden Flame from the Kaldorei civilization that once flourished before the first and great cataclysm which sank the Well of Eternity into the maelstrom. Do you know what it was first created for? It was created from the most ancient and divine magics as a weapon against Sargeras and his demon legion! It was created as a weapon only mortals could wield, and so would be useless in the hands of a Titan! It could bend the fabric of reality in such a way as to create or recreate whole worlds, or destroy them at the mere wish of the bearer. Do you know what I could do with a relic like this?" Gereth's voice became passionate and hopeful.

Zelda's face became impassive. She knew exactly what he could do with a relic like that. Anything he desired.

"Don't you see Shaggara? Zelda?" He said, looking back and forth between the two women. "I can undo the plague! I can make things right! I can make this world as though the burning legion and the Scourge had never touched it! Azeroth can be made a peaceful paradise, and I am this close to finding it!" He squeezed his thumb and forefinger together closely to demonstrate.

Shaggara sat quietly listening to her friend's hopes and dreams. She glanced at Zelda's shocked and fearful face, believing she knew what was going through her mind at that moment. She then folded her own clawed hands in front of her on the table and looked back and forth between her two friends. One she had known for many years, the other only for a few days, but she owed her life to both of them.

"If this relic is as powerful as you say, why didn't the ancient Night Elves use it thousands of years ago when they first had it? They could have stopped much suffering in many worlds if they had." Shaggara asked.

"It was Malfurion Stormrage, according to my research." Gereth replied, understanding the obviousness of the question. "He had grown so distrustful of the Highborn's magic that he took the Golden Flame and, unable to destroy it, he hid it. He sealed it away somewhere only he knew of, and that had been before the first cataclysm which shattered Kalimdor. And it remained hidden until the appearance of this gnome and the Paladin's journal."

Then Zelda spoke. Her face carefully neutral, though friendly. Her emotions were seething within her, and she felt shaky, as though her own world had been turned inside out.

"And you believe this relic is in Ashenvale, in the tower among the Night Elf ruins we saw?" She asked.

"I'm certain of it." Gereth said with a fire in his eyes. "It's the answer that I've been looking for all these years."

I'm certain of it too. Zelda thought to herself apprehensively.

End
file.